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Housekeeping Mage from Another World

Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home!

BY You FUGURUMA
ILLUST. NAMA





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Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustration

Part 1: Love Ending, Love Beginning

Chapter 1: Changes in the Forest

Chapter 2: Love Ending, Love Beginning

Interlude: Shiori's Lost Diary

Part 2: To New Days

Chapter 1: The Forest's Retribution

Chapter 2: The Conclusion of the Case

Chapter 3: To New Days

Interlude 1: Crying Party for the Brokenhearted

Interlude 2: A New Friend

Interlude 3: The Diary of Pel, the Familiar

Interlude 4: The Diary of Rurii, the Familiar

Interlude 5: Shiori's New Diary

Interlude 6: The Story of a Certain Prince and His
Father

Interlude 7: Flower Decorations

Afterword

Bonus Short Stories

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Part 1: Love Ending, Love Beginning

Chapter 1: Changes in the Forest

1

It was the beginning of November, just a month out from the celebrations of the Nativity Festival, to be held at the cathedral. The streets of Tris were lively with food stalls and tourists, and adorned with colorful celebratory decorations. Even in the face of the cold, cutting winds and the light snow, the people of the capital were bright and cheerful.

Clemens and Nadia reveled in the joyous atmosphere as they made their way to the door of the Adventurers' Guild. The guild master, Zack, greeted them from the counter as they entered.

"Ah, you're back! Must have been cold out there."

"The snow's getting thick up there on the mountains. Won't be long before it's piling up down here too."

"Looks like it's going to be a cold, harsh winter this year," said Zack. "I'll have to make sure the novices are all equipped with the right gear."

Clemens and Nadia let out sighs of relief as they collected their rewards. They'd been gone for two days on a suppression quest at a mountain village. Winter expeditions were rough and arduous, even for the experienced, and the two wanted nothing more than to spend the next few days snug and warm at home.

"By the way, is Shiori away? She wasn't here the day before yesterday either..."

Shiori usually busied herself with one-day jobs, but she was nowhere to be seen. With a wry grin, Zack replied to Clemens's question.

"She's off visiting Rurii's home. Alec's with her."

The words left Clemens looking conflicted. Shiori and Alec were growing closer. He and Nadia both cared deeply for Shiori, and their emotions were complicated. Still, they held on to a hope not unlike a prayer, one which outweighed their own personal feelings.

"Let's hope he's the one who can open her heart..." whispered Nadia, her gaze trailing out the window.

Shiori and Alec's destination was a place where Shiori had been deeply scarred. It was a place not far from the dungeon where she had almost died, entirely alone, and with nobody to look after her. It was where she had suffered a wound so deep it had caused her to close her

heart.

It was the Blue Forest.

The thickly clumped snowtrees sparkled, and gentle rays of sun cast unique pale blue shadows across the Blue Forest. It was Rurii's home, and the slime clearly knew the area well, bouncing along trackless paths without a hint of confusion as it returned to the walking trail. Shiori followed after the slime, and stole a glance up at the man walking with her.

His dark magenta eyes peeked out from under his long, straight, chestnut-colored bangs. There was a powerful glimmer in the depth of his eyes, and the slight arch of his eyebrows cut a sharp line that seemed to highlight his strength of will.

His name was Alec Dia. He was an old friend to Zack, who was like Shiori's older brother, and he was a fellow adventurer, one she'd gotten to know since they'd started working together. He had taken a liking to her, and though there were others in the past who'd professed their interest in her, none were as thoughtful or as tender as Alec. Through his patience they'd grown closer, little by little, and when times were hard he was there for her, wrapping her in a warm, powerful embrace.

But Alec wasn't just strong; he also had weaknesses of his own. Weaknesses he had revealed; weaknesses he let her soothe.

He was a person in whom she could take comfort, and a person to whom she could provide it. She felt drawn to him. He told her to trust him, to rely on him, and he waited for her with arms outstretched. She wanted to throw caution to the wind and dive right into his arms.

And yet...

"Getting a little too needy, don't you think? Think about things from the positions of Zack and everyone else, would you?"

"Prostitutes—that's the type of woman who depends on men they're not even engaged to."

The things she'd been told, awful things hidden under the guise of "warnings," all of it stopped her from acting on her feelings. And then...

"These are...these are awful. The likes of you don't even belong in the Guild. Usually you'd have no choice but to sell yourself... You should be grateful that Zack and the others even consider you one of their companions."

"Shiori...? Something wrong?"

Alec's voice drew her back from sinking into the depths of dark memories.

"No, it's nothing," Shiori said, brushing him off with her usual smile. "Just a little lost in my own thoughts."

“Well, okay...”

Alec looked like he had something more to say, but he held off and smiled back at her instead. He reached out and, for a time, caressed her cheek with a tender hand. She was glad for his kindness; the way he waited for her, quietly and without pushing.

It was still early by the time they made it back to the walking trail. There were no other travelers in sight.

“Do you mind if we see to my requests now?” asked Alec.

“Oh...of course. What are they?”

“It’s a gathering request. Two, actually. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

“We’re looking for snow violets and powder snow grass. I have an idea of where we’ll find the violets, but the grass could take a little more work. Are you okay for time? We’ll need to head a little deeper into the forest.”

“No need to worry. I don’t have any plans for the rest of the day.”

Shiori explained that she hadn’t known how long Rurii wanted to spend with the other slimes, so she’d made a point of keeping her schedule open. Alec smiled.

“Then we’re all set,” he said, and they headed further along the walking trail.

The trail, which was about thirty minutes from Brovito Village, was kept in good condition for travelers. It was likely it was cared for often—one could see that the branches and weeds that might otherwise get in the way were well pruned and cut. Clearly, the village had put efforts into its tourism.

“Wow... What a gorgeous park,” said Shiori.

The end of the hiking trail opened into a wide plaza, with benches placed here and there, and a stylish gazebo at its center. It was the perfect place for admiring the fantastical scenery over lunch.

Alec motioned Shiori towards a fence at the edge of the plaza. As she got closer, she realized the fence was actually made from barrier stakes. Their design didn’t hamper the view in any way, and stakes like these were often used at tourist sites and around the villas of the aristocracy.

And yet, even with all this protection...

Shiori couldn’t help but giggle. When she looked around the plaza at the barrier meant to keep magical beasts out, she noticed signs that read, “Entry beyond this point prohibited. Beware of Magical Beasts.” It seemed that travelers sometimes left the safety of the barriers and got themselves into accidents, or were otherwise attacked by monsters.

I guess it doesn’t matter what world it is; people will always find ways to get in trouble.

At this stray thought, a sense of awe and wonder came over Shiori.

“Let’s get going while there’s nobody around,” said Alec.
“Wouldn’t want any curious onlookers following us.”

“Right.”

Shiori took Alec’s hand and crossed over the fence. At her feet, Rurii squeezed smoothly through the gaps. They were heading once more into beast territory. Since it was best to be on guard in such places, that meant spreading out a search magic net.

“Snow violets and powder snow grass, right?” Shiori said. “What kind of flowers are they?”

Alec’s eyes scanned the area as they walked. He knew what he was looking for when it came to snow violets.

“In terms of the flower itself, a snow violet doesn’t look too different from your ordinary violet; the shade of blue is perhaps a little more vibrant. The most prominent features are the stem and the leaves, which are white as snow. That’s how you can tell a snow violet from an ordinary violet. They bloom even in the heart of winter, right here in the snow. It’s how they got their name. That said, the name isn’t particularly imaginative, is it?”

Alec chuckled and went on.

“The snow violet is native to Storydia, so it’s the national flower... Ah, there we are. That’s what we’re looking for.”

Shiori looked over to where Alec was pointing, at a patch of dyed purple among the white grass stretching out around them.

“They grow deep in the forest in places like this, where the sunlight is filtered through the trees. Everything else in the Blue Forest is white, so they’re easy to spot.”

“Wow...” said Shiori. “The leaves are such a pure white. And to think they bloom so easily in such a cold climate.”

The dense leaves of the violets were covered in frost-like white plant hairs, as if to protect the flower from the cold. Alec picked two of them and sucked from the base of one.

“This is how to get to the sweet nectar in the flower. Here, give it a try.”

He pointed the other violet towards Shiori, urging her to taste it. Shiori hesitated for a moment, feeling shy and embarrassed, but Alec put the flower gently to her lips. She had no other choice.

Oh dear...

Shiori narrowed her eyes and tried to avoid looking at Alec’s face. She sipped lightly from the flower, and a gentle sweetness bloomed across her tongue, together with a flowery scent.

“It really *is* sweet...” she said.

“Told you, didn’t I?”

With a satisfied smile, Alec brought Shiori's flower to his own lips and casually sucked out the remaining nectar to taste it for himself.

Wait, what...?!

Alec's indirect kiss sent a tremble through Shiori, but Alec himself paid it no mind. Instead, he simply dropped to his knees as if nothing had happened and began filling an airtight container with snow violets.

"Shall I help...?" Shiori asked, pushing away the trembling of her heart.

"That's okay," said Alec. "But could you keep watch over the area for me? No need to spread your magic out too far."

"Okay. Got it."

Shiori felt a few creatures pass through her search magic net, but the weak energy readings told her they were little more than the smaller wildlife native to the forest. There was no reading like that of a magical beast.

Rurii bounced close to the snow violets and deftly plucked one. It drank the contents of the flower and dropped into a moment of contemplation, absorbing the nectar. Then it moved away from the flowers and back to Shiori's side. It was no longer interested in the violets; even slimes had taste preferences, it seemed.

"Pure snow violets can't be grown outside of the forest, but people sometimes raise hybrid snow violets for show," said Alec. "When I was a boy, I would steal snow violets from the flower beds just to taste their sweetness. Once, a friend and I got so carried away that we emptied a whole corner of the flower bed... We got into all sorts of trouble."

Alec's face relaxed as he spoke nostalgically of the past. It was clearly a fond memory. Shiori could remember similar moments from her own childhood. She remembered sucking the nectar from flowers in the school flowerbeds and by the roadside, just for a taste of the sweetness within.

"That makes two of us," she said. "I remember being told off: 'Roadside flowers are dirty! Stop that!' But even then, I still did it."

"You too, huh?"

Alec's eyes met her own and they laughed.

"Kids will be kids, no matter where you go, I suppose," she said.

"Indeed."

Shiori and Alec were born and raised in vastly different, separate worlds. And yet on the inside, they weren't all that different. The thought made Shiori happy, somehow; the idea that they were the same, and that Alec was a person no different from herself.



“All right, that should do it,” said Alec, putting the airtight container, now full, in his knapsack.

“What will the violets be used for?”

“Oh, the nectar will be used to make yeast. The petals are for coloring.”

“Yeast? Ah... So it’s a request for the yeast hunter?”

“Yes, it’s from Bertil, the baker.”

Bertil Nilsson was a colleague of theirs, with the somewhat unusual nickname of the yeast hunter. He was a baker whose shop was located not far from the Guild. He’d grown famous for his eccentric obsession with and passion for collecting yeast fungus, an indispensable part of the breadmaking process. Still, nobody could deny the quality of his work, and many of Shiori and Alec’s fellow adventurers were among his regulars, enamored by the deep flavor of his bread. His preservable bread, made specifically for expeditions, was also very popular.

“The request for powder snow grass is also from Bertil,” said Alec. “Apparently you can make yeast from the berries.”

“Wow... That means we can look forward to an all-new— Oh?!”

Shiori was suddenly shunted from her thoughts of fragrant, delicious bread. Something had tripped her search magic net. Her breath caught in her throat. Whatever it was, it was coming straight for them, and fast.

“What’s wrong?” Alec asked.

“Something’s on its way.”

Based on the magical energy response, it was most likely a magical beast. It felt unique and noticeably different from the smaller wildlife. When it came within thirty meters, Alec noticed it too, and drew his sword. At the same time, Rurii turned an aggressive red.

They heard footsteps approaching, grass crunching underfoot, and then it leapt from the bushes—a beautiful beast with lustrous, silver-white fur and blue eyes. It let out a soul-chilling roar.

“It’s a snow wolf!”

Snow wolves lived deep in the northern parts of the forest where the snow was thickest, and most commonly moved in large packs numbering around twenty to thirty. They were cautious beasts that rarely appeared in front of humans, and Shiori had only ever seen them in encyclopedias.

“It’s so big...” she whispered.

Shiori had imagined snow wolves to be about the size of dogs, but the magical beast in front of them now was easily two meters in length. The wolf’s lustrous fur glimmered silver in the rays of the sun, and it howled once more before dropping into a low stance. It

positioned itself so it could pounce from its rear legs at a moment's notice. The freezing blue of the wolf's eyes was like the surface of an icy lake, and they shone with danger. The beast let out a fierce growl and cold air wafted from between its bared fangs. It didn't take an experienced adventurer to know that the beast had adopted a posture of intimidation.

Shiori shrunk under the murderous gaze of the huge beast. Snow wolves always aimed for the weakest target first. It was a tactic they used to ensure they captured food without wasting energy. Shiori knew that *she* was the weakest of the group; as such, she knew that the snow wolf would come for her first.

"Shiori, stay close," said Alec, his sword drawn and ready to protect her. "Looks like it's alone."

"My search magic didn't pick up anything else. There's no sign of a pack within a one-hundred-meter radius."

Shiori had spread her search net across a wider area, but found nothing except for the beast that faced them now.

"That's one thing to be thankful for," said Alec. "Do you know how snow wolves hunt?"

"They aim for the weakest prey first."

"Right. So we can assume the beast has its eyes on you. I want you to retreat slowly until you've got your back against that tree behind us."

"Understood."

Shiori stepped backwards, cautiously and carefully, never taking her eyes from the snow wolf. The still-red Rurii spread itself like an ooze by her feet, as if to protect her.

"Thank you, Rurii."

A corner of Rurii's body shook affirmatively, as if to say, "*I'm with you!*"

Alec's sword glowed bronze as it was wrapped in flame. Animals that were active in the winter had instinctive fear of fire and high temperatures, and the snow wolf was no exception. As long as Alec was careful, he could hold the beast off without setting the forest ablaze.

However, it was the beast's fur that would cause the most problems. Snow wolf pelts were highly magic resistant and strong against blades, so the beast's only weak points were its eyes and mouth. Still, these were difficult to aim for with any accuracy. It would have been a different story with an A-rank archer like Linus around, but there was no use wishing for what they didn't have.

The snow wolf's back legs shifted just slightly, and in the next instant it exploded forward, jumping straight at them. It was headed for Alec, having probably decided that Shiori was too difficult to reach

with a man and a slime in the way. The wolf moved at a speed that belied its huge, two-meter-long body, and it attacked with both claw and fang.

But Alec's magic sword lit up and moved just as quickly, its blade colliding with the wolf's body. The snow wolf was sent back into the ground with a dull thump, and the beast let out a short cry of pain. But within a moment it was back on its feet, its eyes locked on Alec with a piercing glare. The beast was not about to give up yet. Without even pausing for breath, the wolf flung itself at Alec once more.

"I had a feeling this fur would be a problem!" Alec grunted.

His eyes narrowed into a frown as he parried the beast's attack a second time and kept it from getting to Shiori, who was still standing behind him. Even his flame-imbued sword couldn't pierce the snow wolf's fur. He'd only succeeded in shaving off some of its silver-white hair.

The fur of the snow wolf was so stiff and hard that it wasn't well suited to traditional fur goods. However, if the fur was carefully woven into chain mail, it made for exceptional protective equipment that was durable, light, and magic resistant. This made it a popular crafting material.

Unfortunately, hunting snow wolves was extremely difficult. They moved in large packs, avoided humans wherever possible, and made their homes in the deepest parts of the forest. On top of that, killing them without damaging their fur required significant power. Because the effort and the cost outweighed the potential rewards, very few went out of their way to specifically gather snow wolf fur. When it was seen on the market, it had usually come from wolves that had strayed from the pack.

The snow wolf was growing tired as it continued to leap at Alec, only to be forced back by his blade. But Alec still had yet to land a killing blow. It pained Shiori to know that he'd be able to fight the beast more effectively if he didn't have to worry about her.

The snow wolf's attacks were growing weaker, but still the beast was not yet ready to give up. It let out a short roar, then once more leapt at Alec with its fangs bared. But this time, Alec saw that the angle of attack was in his favor. He thrust his sword towards the beast's mouth. Sparks flew into the air, along with a sharp, high-pitched echo of metal. The wolf had caught the blade in its powerful jaws.

"Flame Blast, Flamme Straling!"

Without even flinching at his attack being stopped, Alec unleashed fire magic from his sword.

"Grahhh!"

The magical beast let out a cry of pain. Smoke rose from between

the wolf's teeth, and the scent of its charred flesh rose into the air. At this point it wavered slightly, but even then refused to yield. The beast raised itself to its feet and let out a low growl. Alec clicked his tongue in frustration.

So, magical attacks don't have the effect I'd hoped for, but...I did damage the inside of its mouth. So perhaps on the inside it's no different from any other animal?

Once more, the beast crouched low then jumped in for another attack. But Shiori had been waiting for this moment. She stopped casting her search magic and cast a new spell.

"Blaze Cage!"

In the next instant, the snow wolf was trapped within walls of flame, rising three meters high. A fiery half-sphere surrounded the beast like a cage. As fearsome as the monster was, it still shrunk with uncertainty.

Shiori could not kill the snow wolf with fire magic directly. Her magical abilities were not that strong, and the beast had a high magic resistance. So, instead, she used her powers indirectly—even though she could not land a killing blow, she could still suffocate the wolf. And if the beast breathed like any other ordinary animal, she could steal the surrounding air by igniting it. If all went to plan, the beast would suffer internal burns, eventually leading to suffocation.

From the outside, she watched as the beast's front paws folded underneath it. The rear legs stopped moving soon after. She stayed there watching for a time, until the wolf fell to its side and stopped moving entirely. Only then did she release the spell, revealing the corpse of a snow wolf, gray with soot, inside of a charred circle. Alec checked if the beast was still breathing, then turned to her.

"It's dead," he said.

She got the feeling he'd decided to trust her. He'd remained silent when she cast her spell and never warned her about her use of fire magic. It made her happy.

"What was that?" he asked. "That was no ordinary magic cage."

Shiori walked to Alec's side and looked down at the snow wolf's corpse.

"Fire consumes air when it burns, so I thought I could suffocate the beast if I trapped it in a cage of fire. Failing that, I hoped that if snow wolves were the same as other animals, then the heat in the air would cause burns throughout its respiratory system."

"I see... I guess that's one way to handle them," muttered Alec, his expression a blend of confusion and admiration. "It's a bit merciless, though," he added with a wry grin.

Shiori kneeled by the wolf. Rurii had reverted to its usual blue, but seemed a little unhappy that it hadn't gotten a piece of the action.

The slime slid closer to the wolf's corpse and reached out with a feeler to touch it, but it was clearly still hot, and the slime quickly retreated. Perhaps it thought of the wolf as a potential meal. Shiori smiled at the slime and rewarded its protective efforts with some water magic. Then she looked up at Alec.

"Do you mind if I bury it?" she asked. "It seems so sad just to leave it here like this."

"Sure, let's do that."

"I know it's dirtied and burned now, but did you want the beast's fur?"

"No, it's fine. I'm not that hard up for coin. Go ahead and bury it."

"Okay, got it."

Shiori cast her earth magic to open a hole in the ground, into which the wolf sank. She then filled the hole and evened the ground around it. It was clear that something had been buried there, but at least the corpse was in the earth. From this point, it would either slowly deteriorate, or it would become sustenance for any magical beast with a sharp sense of smell.

"Strange, though... Even if that wolf had somehow strayed from its pack, it launched itself at us all on its own. It seemed especially aggressive."

"It did, didn't it?"

All signs indicated that the wolf had targeted them from a distance and then launched its attack. Based on the information in their encyclopedias, which was all they had to go on, it was suspicious behavior for a snow wolf. At least, that was the feeling she got from Alec's words. But however much they thought about it, they simply didn't have enough to prove things one way or the other.

"Shiori."

"Yes?"

Alec dropped to a knee and put a bottle in her hand. It was a potion for magic energy recovery.

"Drink it. Fire cages, search magic... You've used a lot of magical energy."

The attack magic had been a particularly big drain on Shiori's energy, and she felt weak in her legs from the exhaustion.

"I have potions of my own, you know," she protested.

"But I have more than enough in reserve. Go ahead, take it," Alec said, and then grinned. "Or perhaps you'd prefer to drink it mouth to mou—"

Shiori's response was immediate.

"Thank you! Thank you so very much! I will drink it myself!"

Alec's eyebrows drooped.

"That was quick..."

Ignoring Alec's muttering, Shiori drank the potion. She breathed a sigh of relief as she felt the spent magic energy return to her body.

"Just what I needed. Thank you."

"Shall we take a short rest before we head off again?"

Alec was worried. She was glad for his kindness, but all the same she shook her head. She was admittedly still tired, but she didn't want to hold him up. She didn't want to slow them down for something so trivial.

"I'm fine," she said. "This isn't anything to worry about."

She had enough energy to see them through this gathering request. Alec's brow furrowed ever so slightly, and he let out a short sigh. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then stopped himself. Instead, he reached out with a hand and caressed her cheek. It felt like this had been happening a lot recently.

"Am I really so unreliable?"

These halting words slipped from Shiori's mouth, but they were met with a smile.

"You're not unreliable at all. It's just... I was just worried. You're my companion," Alec said. "Let me worry about you sometimes."

"Don't show me that pitiful face every time you run out of magic. Begging for sympathy? Seriously, give it a rest already."

The words sprung back to life inside of her, weaving themselves with the warm words Alec had just spoken, piercing her heart. She had always done as she was told, working to make sure that nothing showed on her face—not the pain, not the suffering, not the stress. She had learned to grit her teeth and push through it. And she was glad she was able to hide her condition. It was easier when people didn't worry about her. If she could hide it, then she wouldn't be a burden. She wouldn't make anyone mad or unhappy. And so...

She looked up at Alec. There was something searching, something sad in his expression.

"If it gets to be too much, you can say something. It's what we all do, and I'm no exception. So don't feel like you have to overdo it. If we don't care for each other, if we don't take care of one another... Well, that's just not what companions do."

Alec's words seemed to erase everything she'd been told by her past companions. She felt the warmth of those words sink into her heart. She felt like she might drown in that kindness. But that was also why she needed self-restraint. She was scared that if she became a burden, a nuisance, his eyes would turn cold. She was as painfully aware of this as she was her own powerlessness.

I don't want to be abandoned like that again.

If Alec were to abandon her, she knew she would not recover. She would not be able to pick herself up again. And she knew that if she

ever stopped moving, here in this world where she did not belong, where there was no one for her to rely on, it would mean her death.

She had opened her heart to Alec, and she didn't want his feelings for her to turn to hate. Though she knew he wasn't that kind of person, she could not rid herself of the fear that had taken root at the bottom of her heart.

There was a mistaken belief that had been stamped into the fiber of her very being. It was the idea that relying on others was something to be ashamed of. She was terrified that if she ever let her companions down, they would discard her. This incorrect conviction had slowly been hammered into her over time and under circumstances that were far from normal, and even now it clung to her, in the deepest reaches of her heart. She couldn't rid herself of the notion that she was an other, an outsider, and that people were only kind to her because of that. It was the only reason they overlooked her mistakes.

I've been hurt far worse than I thought...

The thought passed through a cold, calm corner of Shiori's mind as she felt the warmth in Alec's hand, holding her own in silence.

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Alec pulled Shiori along through the forest, all of it bathed in a pale blue. He brought his footsteps in sync with her own so as not to force her to hurry, and looked down at her.

She'd kept her head down since they'd last spoken, and uttered not a single word since. There was a hint of confusion in her features. He'd realized during their journey together that although Shiori gently refused any attempts to enter her heart, if he made an effort to take her hand in his own, she did not let it go. And he didn't think it was just his imagination that the hand clasping his own seemed to cling to the connection. When he brought her into an embrace too, she did not resist. In truth, she longed for support.

Perhaps it was that the two feelings were wrestling inside of her; the desire to depend on somebody, and the need to be completely independent. Shiori longed to escape the walls of her heart, but when she realized it, she hid behind them once again. Alec could imagine that conflict playing out within her, over and over.

When he looked at her face, and the expression that seemed completely at a loss for what to do, his heart ached at the pain he felt from her deep emotional scars. She'd found herself in a foreign land, and been pushed to the point of being unable to trust anyone. And all of it because of malicious abuse dressed up as "warnings." Then she'd been used and taken advantage of until she was almost killed. That she had endured all of that, and could still stand tall, was no small

feat.

And yet, the core of that strength, the reason it existed...

At some point, the core of her is going to break.

Shiori had sacrificed a part of herself in return for strength. But if that part of herself crumbled... The thought of it filled Alec with worry.

I only hope I can stay here by her side, and protect her, always...

"Are you okay...?"

Alec blinked. Shiori's voice surprised him; he didn't understand where her question came from.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You look troubled, so I wondered if perhaps you were injured. Are you hurt? Do you feel ill?"

Damn it, Alec thought. My worry must be showing in my face.

He cursed himself on the inside, but it was true to say that yes, he was hurt. When he thought of her, he hurt. But he knew that speaking the words would only worry her in turn, so he kept them to himself.

"Nothing to worry yourself about," he said with a smile, brushing her off. "Just thinking."

"Really? You're not pushing yourself?"

"Really. And you know, it's kind of funny to be told that by someone with the exact same problem."

Unsure of how to respond at being put on the spot, Shiori averted her gaze. The gesture made Alec smile, and feeling more like himself again, he turned his thoughts to work.

Gathering powder snow grass was considerably more difficult than gathering snow violets. Just as the name suggested, the plant's leaves and berries were as white as snow, so it blended in with the scenery of the forest. All Alec had to go on was that the plant grew in the deeper parts of the Blue Forest. If he didn't keep his eyes open and look carefully, it wouldn't be easy to find. He also had to keep his guard up; there had been cases of people who got so immersed in looking for the plant that they ran into accidents or magical beasts.

The one who had posted the request, Bertil, had said he'd be happy with just the snow violets, but his preferred outcome, of course, was getting his hands on both the violets *and* the berries.

Just as Alec was thinking this, Rurii bounced off the path and over to the roots of a snowtree, where it began jumping up and down.

"What's that all about?" Alec asked.

"Looks like it's calling us over."

As they walked over, they found clumps of a white plant behind the roots of the snowtree. At the end of the thin branching stems were clusters of small, pure white berries.

"This is powder snow grass. Rurii, you found it for us..."

Rurii grew big and shook with pride. Then it reached out with a feeler, broke one of the stems off, and absorbed it into its body. The plant dissolved into the slime like melting snow, and it soon did it all over again. Then Rurii turned to Alec and Shiori with something like curiosity in its tilted body.

“Well, are you guys going to grab some or what?” it seemed to ask.

Alec broke off a stem and passed it to Shiori.

“Try it,” he said. “It’s good.”

Shiori stared at the berries with some trepidation, then timidly placed them in her mouth. Within an instant, the hesitation on her face melted.

“Wow. It’s like melting snow,” she said, “and it has such a gentle flavor. It’s like vanilla ice cream.”

“Yes, it’s quite similar,” said Alec, nodding.

He thought back to the first time he’d ever tried vanilla ice cream. It was when he was living at the castle. It was served one day in the early afternoon, and even now he could still remember how impressed he was at the moment the dessert entered his mouth. He remembered the cold sensation of it melting like snow on his tongue, and then the gentle sweetness filling his mouth. He would never forget it. It wasn’t served often because it cooled the body, but even now as an adult, vanilla ice cream was one of Alec’s favorite foods.

Frozen desserts like vanilla ice cream had once been an expensive treat that only the upper classes could indulge in. Over the last several decades, however, it had become something even common townsfolk could purchase as an occasional treat. This was thanks to the work of the past king, and the king before him, both of whom had poured energy into improving produce distribution, farming, and preservation techniques to help the poor food conditions in colder regions.

They were good kings; both the one Alec had spent a few short years living with, and the one he knew only through portraits. The face of his father came to him then—faintly, and with mixed feelings. In the next instant, Rurii slapped his hand as if to tell him to hurry up with his gathering.

Alec chuckled. He’d never imagined he’d someday find himself being scolded by a slime for slacking on the job.

Doing as the slime requested, Alec took out a container, which he filled with powder snow berries. Bertil had provided him with the container, which had small bags inside of it. They were apparently drying agents. Though powder snow berries were quite resistant to heat, the same could not be said for their resistance to moisture.

Once Alec had finished filling the container, Rurii began to look for whatever had been left. It looked as if the slime had been waiting for him to finish his work; it was very intelligent.

“Looks like Rurii must be quite the fan of powder snow berries,” said Shiori.

“You might be right.”

Rurii hadn’t liked the taste of the snow violets, but powder snow grass seemed to match the slime’s preferences. Perhaps the difference lay in the fact that snow violet nectar contained a strong floral scent, while powder snow grass was comprised of a simple, gentle sweetness.

Alec and Shiori broke off a few more stems and ate them. It felt as if that slight sweetness melted even their hearts. Their eyes met in a moment of simple, shared joy and they smiled at each other...at which point Shiori’s face suddenly grew tense.

“Something is coming for us again,” she said. “This time there’s three of them. It feels the same as last time... They’re fast!”

It looked as if magical beasts had once again tripped Shiori’s search magic net. Rurii turned an aggressive red. Alec readied himself for battle as he felt the approaching energy. He unsheathed his sword and pointed it out in front of him, right where three snow wolves appeared.

“Just as I thought...snow wolves!” he said.

The beasts howled as one. It was a sign they were beginning their attack.

“Alec! Don’t worry about me, just fight! I’ve got Rurii to protect me!”

Shiori already had her back against a snowtree as she shouted these words. She knew how hard it would be to fight three snow wolves and protect her at the same time.

Taking on a lone snow wolf was B-rank difficulty, but a fast-moving group that fought as a pack was A- or S-rank depending on the conditions. Large groups in the twenties and thirties that barraged enemies with combination assaults—pack warfare, as it was called—were the most dangerous.

As an A-ranker, Alec wanted to think he could handle this much with ease, but the three wolves would be able to attack him as a pack. Together, they were considerably more dangerous than any one of them alone. On top of that, something was itching at the back of his mind; the situation was far too unusual. How had they run into stray wolves *twice* in such a short time period?

“But, Shiori...” he began.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her, but he felt some concern at leaving a support class undefended while he focused purely on the battle at hand. As if Rurii could read his thoughts, its body trembled, sending him a message.

“Leave Shiori to me!”

Alec knew then that he could trust it. The slime hadn’t left her

side in the last battle to foolishly join the attack. Instead, it had remained in place, insistent on defending her. It was the ideal guard. Shiori, too, wouldn't go down without a fight.

So, he would trust them. He would trust them both.

"Okay," he said. "But stay safe!"

Alec leapt towards the wolves, knowing it was to his advantage to take the initiative. With a slice of his sword he split the group apart, and as they tried to regroup he set his sights on one of the wolves and moved in. He did not allow the beast a chance to even flinch. He thrust his sword down its throat, and with a chant, imbued his blade with fire magic.

"Flame Eruption, Eksplosiv Flamme!"

"Groar!"

With its throat and respiratory system awash in flame, the white wolf writhed on the ground.

"Yeah, it's merciless..." Alec muttered. "But it sure works."

He'd put the effects of Shiori's Blaze Cage spell to practical use. Suffocating the beasts by burning their respiratory systems was very effective. The snow wolf's defense and magical resistance went only as far as the fur that covered it; on the inside, it was as weak as any other beast. This was especially helpful for Alec, who had very little experience fighting them; after all, the wolves rarely left the deeper parts of the forest. However, he could only do this because he was facing off against a smaller pack of three. If he were to be attacked by a larger pack, it wouldn't be nearly as easy.

The remaining two wolves immediately recognized Alec as the bigger threat and switched targets. Naturally, they headed straight for Shiori.

"Blaze Cage!"

Shiori cast fire magic, surrounding herself and Rurii. This time, she'd opted to use the cage as a defensive wall. The wolves came to a halt, uncertain of what to do. Alec slashed at them with his sword, splitting the two of them apart once more. In the corner of his eye, he saw the wolf he'd attacked earlier convulsing on the ground. It did not have long left. Alec turned his attention to the remaining two wolves.

The two magical beasts hesitated. Would they charge the wall of fire to get to the weaker target, or fight the foe that faced them here? Their instinct to attack the weaker target was clashing with their instinctual fear of fire.

But a moment was all Alec needed, and he moved in to attack one of the snow wolves. So as not to end up in the same dire situation as the first wolf, it leapt backwards. As long as the two wolves were kept apart, they wouldn't be able to fight as a team. Alec kept a watchful eye on Shiori as he chased after the wolf.

“Whirlwind, Virvelvind!”

A whirlwind appeared at the wolf’s feet and it faltered. Alec closed the distance between them in an instant, then thrust his sword into the wolf’s mouth.

“Flame Eruption, Eksplosiv Flamme!”

Perhaps this wolf was less matured than the first, because its throat burst at the blast of magical fire, and it collapsed in a heap without so much as a whimper. The beast’s body let out one last quiver, and then it was dead.

Alec turned back towards Shiori, but found that the situation was already under control. The last wolf had gathered its courage and attempted to charge Shiori’s wall of fire, only to find its head swallowed inside of Rurii. The wolf struggled and bit down on the slime, but Rurii was already inside of it, melting its innards. The wolf’s struggles were for naught, and in the end it crumpled to the ground as blood bubbled from it. Once the slime was sure the wolf was dead, it crawled out from inside of it.

“Are you okay? It doesn’t hurt where the wolf bit you, does it?”

Shiori touched parts of the half-transparent slime’s body, where the wolf’s fangs had left marks. Rurii responded with a wobble as if to say it wasn’t the slightest problem, and as they watched, the scars quickly filled with slime. It was back to its smooth, beautiful self in no time. It looked so convenient, it almost made Shiori jealous.

“Looks like we got them...” Alec said.

“I’m glad the two of you are safe.”

“Me too.”

It was good teamwork. Alec was happy with how they’d done in battle, but that didn’t mean he could let his guard down yet.

“I don’t like this,” he said. “Something is off.”

“You’re right... Something strange is going on, isn’t it?”

Shiori spoke in a low voice, full of uncertainty. It was her first time even seeing snow wolves. They were extremely guarded creatures, and they very rarely appeared in front of people. And yet Alec and Shiori had encountered the magical beasts twice in the space of just a few hours, and not far from a settlement to boot. Something odd was afoot, Alec was sure of it.

At that very moment, they heard a howl in the distance. It wasn’t too far from them. As if in response, howls rang through the air from elsewhere in the forest. They were the howls of wolves...snow wolves, and lots of them. It was a pack.

“We have to get back to the village!” yelled Alec.

“Let’s go!”

It seemed their vague fears had suddenly become a reality. It was too dangerous to stay where they were. Rurii quickly slid up and onto

Alec's shoulder. Without a pause, Alec lifted Shiori from the ground and began running back towards the walking trails.

Something had happened in the Blue Forest...some unknowable change.

3

There wasn't a single trace of another person as they ran along the trail towards Brovito. Snow wolves rarely ever moved in packs so close to human settlements. It was unusual enough for them to even leave the deeper parts of the forest. Had something happened to cause this reaction?

Alec could just make out the sounds in the distance. Shiori noticed them too. The clatter of swords, voices cursing, high-pitched screams, and horses neighing. All of it blended together, and through it all was the constant howling of snow wolves.

"No... Is the village under attack?" Shiori's voice was stiff with worry.

Rurii, still sitting on Alec's shoulder, had already turned red. As the walking trail turned into highroad paths, Alec set Shiori back on her feet and gripped her hand in his own. Rurii leapt from his shoulders and took up a position in their blind spot.

"We don't know what we'll find in the village," said Alec, "so don't leave my side under any circumstances!"

"Got it!"

They rushed along the main road, their eyes on Brovito Village. The air echoed with the sounds of blades, horses, screams, cries of rage, and howls. There was no doubting it now; the village was locked in battle.

Alec and Shiori came across a group of travelers and merchant caravans at the village outskirts. The travelers all knew something was going on, and their faces were filled with terrified uncertainty. The horses pulling their carriages were nervous and scared.

"Do you know what's going on?" Alec asked.

The man Alec addressed looked to be a merchant. His face was pale as he spoke.

"I only just got here, so I don't know much. Apparently a caravan was attacked by beasts. White wolves are assaulting the village. But there are conflicting reports, and we don't know anything for certain. What in the world is going on in there...?"

Alec and Shiori shared a glance. The red Rurii wobbled in place.

"So it really is snow wolves?"

"Seems like that's the case."

And if it *was* snow wolves, it would make things all the more

difficult. Still, as adventurers they had to try and help. Alec turned to a group of men who looked to be guards for the merchant caravans.

“There are more wolves in the forest, so you need to hurry. Get away from here and seek shelter at a neighboring village. And get word to the garrison knights!”

“Understood!”

The men sprang into action immediately. The travelers and merchants began to leave right away. Alec was glad they’d listened to him, and that they understood the danger they were in.

“We have to hurry to the village!”

Brovito was only a small village, but it had a squad of stationed knights. It was likely they’d already sent word to other nearby garrisons and the capital, but it was still the responsibility of adventurers to protect local citizens and take down magical beasts. Alec and Shiori looked ahead to the village as they ran in.

They found the place transformed into a battlefield. The attack had been sudden. The main street was littered with baskets of villagers’ goods and the baggage of travelers. A few snow wolf corpses littered the streets, and injured knights and people sat against the walls, moaning. The two of them had to find a way to push back the snow wolves before more arrived.

Alec quickly surveyed the area. All of the doors to the houses were shut tight, and villagers peeked from upper floor windows anxiously. He called out to them.

“If any of you can do so, please try and help the injured inside!”

He knew by their pale faces that most of them were far too scared, but a few brave individuals nodded, disappearing from their windows, then emerging from their doors in a rush. They helped the injured into homes while Alec and Shiori watched for an attack.

“You’re going there, aren’t you?” said one of the villagers, motioning towards the town square with a jab of his jaw.

“Of course. It’s our job.”

“Then please, be careful. There’s a lot of them.”

“Thank you... Oh, I’m sorry to burden you, but could you take care of this for me?”

“Of course. Pass it over.”

Alec took off his knapsack and gave it to the man. He didn’t want his baggage getting in the way of battle. He then gestured to Shiori, who left her own knapsack with the man as well. The villager accepted their bags without complaint.

The rest of the villagers quickly returned to their homes and shut their doors tight.

“I can carry the rest of the injured to a rooftop with magic,” Shiori said.

“Good. I’ll bring them over, then you can take care of the rest. Rurii, you protect Shiori; more wolves could arrive at any moment.”

Rurii quivered a silent reply: “*Understood!*”

Alec brought the rest of the injured to a nearby house, where Shiori used earth magic to raise the ground and boost them up to the rooftop terrace. The villagers waiting above helped to carry the wounded inside. Others watching ran to their windows and offered to help. Alec thanked them with a wave.

It was hard work moving the badly injured, particularly the bulkier knights, but he managed to get by with some muscle-boosting magic. Shiori kept magical energy exhaustion at bay by drinking recovery potions as she worked. As they closed in on the center of the village, they gathered the injured and helped them to the rooftops and top floors of nearby buildings. They were glad for the people at their windows, waiting and ready to help.

Finally, Alec and Shiori made it to the town square, where the village’s inns stood side by side. It was filled with voices cursing, a burning smell, and the scent of blood. It was impossible to tell if that last stench came from the injured or the wolves.

Some adventurers must have been at the village when the fighting broke out, because Alec caught glimpses of them standing with the knights and facing off against the wolves. They were all protecting a number of covered wagons. For their part, the beasts seemed to have their eyes set on the merchant caravans leading the wagons. The horses at the heads of the wagons were asleep—probably someone had cast a spell to keep them from going wild in the confusion.

The knights and adventurers were surrounded by a pack of snow wolves, all of them snarling and baring their fangs. At a glance, they numbered at least sixty or seventy. A suppression quest of this magnitude was well beyond A-rank—they were in S-rank territory now. There was no way for Alec to know how strong the knights and adventurers were, but they were clearly outnumbered.

It would not be easy, but they had no choice; they had to fight.

At that moment, a snow wolf leapt at Alec from the side. He responded immediately, knocking it away with his blade and sending it flying to the ground. The wolf quickly sprang to its feet and snarled. Then, it was suddenly enveloped in a familiar cage of fire, inside of which it collapsed, suffocated. Shiori’s magic again.

“You fools! You’ll ruin their valuable fur!”

The nasty shout made Shiori’s breath catch in her throat. Alec glared in the direction of the voice and the man it belonged to. He looked like he was a merchant, and he clung to one of the wagons, protected and perfectly safe behind the wall of knights and adventurers.

You son of a bitch. I won't forget you.

Under Alec's stare, the man wilted, hiding behind the wagon once more.

"Don't listen to any of them!" shouted a knight. "Focus on taking down the snow wolves!"

"They're the ones that brought the pack here in the first place! Who cares what they think—have at the beasts!" shouted another.

"A fat lot of good fur will do you when you're dead!"

The voices of villagers and travelers overlapped as they shouted from the windows of their houses and inns. The merchants around the caravan shrunk back from the rage thrown in their direction.

"So that's what happened," said Alec. "I don't know exactly what it was, but those idiot merchants must have done something to anger the snow wolves."

Unless they were especially starved of food, creatures as cautious as snow wolves never attacked human settlements in packs. At the very least, Alec had never heard of such behavior. When snow wolves *did* attack, it was when their fellow wolves were harmed or otherwise put in danger. This begged the question: What had the merchants done to cause such an attack? Surely, they had to have been aware of what they were dealing with.

One especially large wolf let out an intimidating roar, and the surrounding wolves responded like an army following an order. All of them crouched low for an instant, before launching one after the other and renewing their attack on the knights and adventurers protecting the caravans.

The wolves came from all directions, their movements chaotic as they dove in, attacked, then quickly retreated. The defenders had no idea which wolf would attack or when—and even the knights, who were used to fighting in groups, were left struggling against the assault.

This was the fearsome pack warfare of the snow wolves, a strategy that defeated an enemy force by whittling down its strength.

"Alec! I'll support you from the rooftops!" said Shiori.

"Got it! But please, don't do anything rash!"

Alec passed Shiori a handful of magical energy recovery potions. He could see the onset of exhaustion in her features. He would have preferred for her to find a place to rest, but under the circumstances it simply wasn't possible. So when she said she'd get herself to a place of greater safety, he didn't try to argue, but instead accepted the idea.

"Same to you, Alec. As for Rurii..."

Shiori's voice trailed off in a moment of hesitation, and a red shape smoothly slid up around Alec's feet.

"Rurii, you should..." Alec began to say.

The slime bounced into the air, as if to communicate that it, too, was prepared to fight by Alec's side.

"I'll be fine on my own," said Shiori, "and I'll make sure to stay up high. I'll take care of myself. Rurii will be okay too, I'm sure of it. It won't do anything rash."

"But..." Alec protested.

"Rurii wants to go with you because it sees you as a companion now."

A companion. Shiori's familiar—her friend—had accepted Alec as one of its companions. And, as if agreeing with Shiori's words, the slime's body quivered.

"Okay then. Rurii, if I deem a situation too dangerous, you have to run. Shiori, don't come down from the rooftops under any circumstances, got it?"

Shiori nodded. Rurii bounced into the air again to show its understanding.

"Fighting side by side with a slime... Interesting."

This was not an experience one got to have often. A battle-ready grin rose to Alec's face. He kept watch over Shiori as they moved to the wall of a nearby building, where Shiori used earth magic to raise the ground beneath her feet so she could jump to the roof. Once he was sure she was safe, he readied his blade. Meanwhile, Rurii spread itself out into a wide puddle.

S-rank suppression. How should I handle this?

Alec could tell by the movements of the knights and adventurers that they knew their way around a battle, but they were at a disadvantage while they were defending the caravans. Many of them were already injured.

Alec had himself almost been promoted to S-rank a few times, but even so, he was heavily outnumbered here. He did not intend to go down without a fight, but if he wasn't smart about countering the snow wolves, things would only become more of a problem. Though the town square was a fairly open space, he still wanted to avoid using any big fire spells if he could help it.

His one piece of good fortune was that the wolves were targeting the caravans. Though a few wolves broke from the pack to attack him, the vast majority focused their attacks on the defending knights and adventurers.

Given the situation, Alec felt his best option was to take down the snow wolves from behind. It wouldn't stop them at their source, but little by little, he could whittle down their numbers. He could also take a few of them at a time, trapping them in cages of fire as Shiori had done earlier. He wasn't particularly good with ranged magic, but he wasn't in a position to be choosy either. Every moment wasted

meant more people getting hurt. He just hoped nobody had been killed yet.

Alec shouted at the knights huddled around the caravans.

"If any of you can use magic, aim your fire spells for their mouths! The snow wolves aren't magic resistant on the inside!"

A few of the knights called back in response, acknowledging the information.

At that point, Alec readied himself. He fell into a crouch, then launched himself at the wolves. Rurii sprang into action alongside him, oozing with a strange magical energy.

"Amazing..."

Shiori couldn't help but murmur this as she watched Alec and Rurii in battle. Using his magic sword, Alec separated a few wolves from the pack, then quickly cut them down one by one. There was no wasted energy in his movements—it was all graceful and beautiful. Rurii snuck up on wolves from behind, utilizing sneak attacks to creep into the beasts through their mouths, noses, and ears before destroying them from the inside. Alec and Rurii fought as a team, supporting one another and cutting down a number of wolves from the outskirts of the pack. Both of them were incredibly strong when they could move freely, without needing to worry about defense.

However, there was still a great number of snow wolves, and the defending knights were getting worn down by the ceaseless onslaught. As for the merchants, they were frozen with fear and unable to move. Some even looked as if they might lose themselves to their terror and panic. If that happened, there was no telling what they might end up doing.

"Looks like I'd better make saving them my first priority..." Shiori muttered.

It vexed her to think that she was leaving her companions, still in battle, to save a group of unscrupulous merchants, but now wasn't the time to be focusing on such thoughts.

Shiori moved from rooftop to rooftop, circling to the back of the defending knights. She used earth magic to craft a walkable path along the slanted roof, then surveyed the group below. Together with the merchants shivering in fear, she saw a number of injured knights resting against the wall.

"Sir knights!" she called down. The group turned to look up at her. "I can make a path to the roof for the weak and the wounded! What do you think?"

The knights looked at each other for a moment, then quickly responded.

"Please! Do it!"

The voice of another knight soon followed the first.

“These men are to be arrested! They’re the ones who made this mess, and they will need to be interrogated!”

“Understood!”

The group of merchants were clearly shaken by the word “arrest,” but because they lacked any other means of escape, they stayed put. At that point, one of the knights seemed to mutter something, and the merchants collapsed like puppets with their strings cut. It was sleep magic. Shiori felt a sliver of jealousy—she was not particularly good at magic that directly affected a subject’s physical or mental status. With his left arm injured, the knight cringed in pain, but he flashed Shiori a grin.

“I’d decided to leave them to fend for themselves if worse came to worst,” he said, “but this changes things. Putting them to sleep is our best option now.”

She had a few people stand by the wall, then raised the ground to bring them to the roof. She repeated this process a few times, and felt frustrated that they were too heavy for her to carry all at once. Once she’d brought everyone to the roof, she then widened the earth platforms to create more space.

The soldiers were relieved to finally have the merchants out of direct danger, and many collapsed where they stood. They looked utterly exhausted. Nobody could deny that they were all badly wounded, to the point where even just standing was a struggle.

“Are you okay?”

Shiori ran to the knights with medicine, but they waved her off.

“I’ll be honest—it’s rough,” said one, “but we’ll survive. Please, focus on doing what you can to support those still fighting at the caravans.”

But with her meager abilities, what could she do to support the knights against such a huge pack of monsters? At this rate, it was possible that Alec and Rurii would also fall victim to the snow wolves. After all, nobody knew when a rescue party would arrive.

“Hey, you.”

The voice interrupted Shiori’s thoughts as she looked down at the town square below. She turned around to find two men standing before her. They seemed to have come via a nearby rooftop.

They look like merchants... But that would mean...

“Could you raise those caravans down there? I don’t expect you to lift them as high as the rooftops, but we’d be much obliged if you could raise them with that magic you just used.”

It was just as she’d thought; the two men were somehow connected to the merchant caravan below. She gathered that a few must have escaped notice by using the villagers and tourists as cover.

Shiori glanced at the caravans, then turned back to the men.

"It's impossible," she said. "There's too many caravans for me to guarantee I could do it safely. And besides, that much magical energy would be better spent on pushing back those snow wolves."

This angered the men, who clearly hadn't expected her to refuse.

"Are you kidding?! There's incredibly valuable merchandise in those caravans!" said one. "Do you have any idea how much money we'll lose if it's damaged? Are *you* going to take responsibility for that?!"

"You call yourself an adventurer?!" spat the other. "But you can't help people in need?!"

"If you can't raise the caravans out of danger, at least find some way to take out those snow wolves without damaging their fur! Then we can make some money back on our damaged goods!"

Their words infuriated Shiori—the sheer greed of them, and the men's inability to think of anything other than their own profits. It was *their* fault the village was facing this catastrophe!

"If anyone has to take responsibility for all of this, it's *you*," she said. "You brought that pack of wolves here! Do you have any idea the harm you've brought upon this village?! *You're* the ones who should be charged for all of this damage! It is not my job to clean up the mess you've made!"

"You little..."

Furious, the men came at her with clenched fists. Two injured knights were able to take one of them down, but the other reached for the lash hanging by his side. Clearly, it was for use with the caravans.

If that hits me...

There was barely enough room for her to move, and the man closed in on her in an instant. Shiori took up a defensive posture, trying to cast a barrier with wind magic, but then a shock ran through her left arm.

"Ngh!"

A near silent scream slipped from her lips as tremendous pain tore through her. She hadn't been able to totally deflect the strike from the lash, which had been thrown with such rage. For a moment there was a sharp, cold sensation, as if she'd been struck with ice, but then a burning pain spread through her body. It was so excruciating that for a moment she stopped breathing.

The man was just about to come down with another blow from his lash, when he let out a short groan and crumpled to the floor. Behind him stood a knight, heaving with exhaustion and holding a sheathed sword in hand. He'd managed to knock the merchant out with the weapon, but he was covered in blood from countless cuts, all of them from snow wolves. Each movement caused more of them to open and

bleed. Shiori rushed over to his side.

“Thank you so much, you saved me. But this bleeding, it’s...”

“We’ll bandage it up. I’ll make it through,” he said. “More importantly, though, are you okay? He hit you very hard.”

“I’ll be fine... I cast a barrier spell, which lessened the blow.”

In truth, however, merely moving her left arm caused Shiori terrible pain. Still, her clothes had not been torn. It was just a bruise. She felt that it was nothing compared to the injuries of the knight standing before her. Taking a deep breath, she did her best to grit through the pain. She could at least move her fingers. She would be okay.

“Are you sure?”

The knight’s eyes narrowed with concern, but Shiori forced a smile onto her lips, which somehow managed to convince him. The knight let out a sigh and looked down at the merchant with disgust.

“This would only be if you’re able to do so...” he said, “but I wonder if you could create a path to the terrace of the inn next door. I want to find some place to keep these men tied up and restrained. I won’t let them try anything stupid like that again.”

Shiori nodded. She created the path, persevering against the pain in her arm, and afterwards a few young people from the village came over from the other side.

“Please tell us if there’s anything we can do to help,” said the young woman who appeared to be their leader. She motioned to the fallen merchants with her jaw. “I guess we can start by moving these guys across to the inn?”

“Thank you. Tie them up while they’re still unconscious. We can’t have any of them getting away.”

At the knight’s words, a young man went back to the inn and returned with some rope.

“I know you’re angry,” the knight added, “but I urge you not to take their punishment into your own hands. They have to be interrogated, and it’ll only be more work for us to have to explain any unnecessary injuries later.”

The group of youths exchanged disappointed looks. The knight had seen through them. Still, they did as they were told, and simply glared as they tied up the merchants. Their rage could instead be seen in the knots they tied, the ropes cutting tight into the merchants’ arms. Shiori pretended not to see this, however, and the knights overlooked it also.

As the group carried the merchants across to the inn, the young woman returned to Shiori and the knights.

“Now we have to do something about the wolves, don’t we?” she said.

The girl's name was Anika. Carrying a small bow in her hands, she looked down from the roof, but told them not to expect too much; her experience only went as far as basic hunting.

Though a number of snow wolves had fallen since they'd last looked, many still remained. Alec and Rurii didn't look like they were in any danger yet, but the knights who'd been fighting since the attack had started were beginning to show signs of exhaustion.

"Now that this has happened, we won't be seeing tourists here for a while... And this is supposed to be our busiest season. What a mess..."

Anika clicked her tongue in frustration, the disgust in her frown clear. Brovito Village's economy revolved around two main industries: farming and tourism. In winter, when farming slowed down, tourism became an especially important source of income. In the period before the Nativity Festival, the Blue Forest was a popular destination for travelers, and anything that limited their ability to visit the place would hurt the village as well.

"Well, those merchants were right about one thing. If we can get our hands on any snow wolf fur or meat, it'll help us make up for our losses," said Anika. Then she shrugged. "But it's certainly not our main priority, given the circumstances."

Shiori gritted her teeth at the young girl's comment, knowing she had to be careful about how she took down the snow wolves. Still, when she tried to figure out the ideal way of handling them, no easy answers sprung to mind. The monsters were magic resistant, strong against direct attacks, and their only weak points—their eyes and mouths—made for extremely small and difficult targets. This was exactly why even Alec and the experienced team of knights were still locked in battle—there was no easy way to simply round up and take down the wolves all at once. Shiori wondered how best to use her own low-level magic to help cull the beasts' numbers.

Fire...? Water...?

She already knew that she could suffocate the monsters with her fire magic. However, creating that fire required considerably more magical energy than creating water. If drowning them was an option, all she needed to do was cast the right amount of water and wait. However, snow wolves had a strong resistance to ice, which was of a higher magic level than water. As such, she feared that water would not be particularly effective.

In the end, Shiori decided to go with the method she was most sure of. She surveyed the town square and determined her point of attack: the middle of the pack, a location that Alec and the knights still had yet to get close to.

"Blaze Cage!"

The cage of fire quickly trapped several wolves. Shiori raised the temperature to cut off their oxygen more quickly. The sudden flow of magic out of her body made her legs go weak, but she gritted her teeth and endured. Just then, a snow wolf leapt on top of one of the caravans and launched itself through the air towards Shiori.

A shrill cry rang out through the air.

“Watch out!”

“Earthen Wall!”

While maintaining the Blaze Cage spell, Shiori quickly cast a barrier with her earth magic. The wolf slammed into the barrier and fell back down to the ground. The knights around Shiori were stunned.

“Did she just cast multiple magic spells at the same time?!” shouted one in surprise.

It was difficult for mages in this world to cast multiple magics simultaneously. Shiori herself had only been able to learn this ability through constant practice. The act required both focus and skill. All the same, more than the ability to cast multiple magics at once, Shiori wished she had magical power strong enough to take down all of these beasts in one decisive strike. She did not like how long her strategy took.

A few seconds passed, perhaps more...and then the wolves inside of the flaming cage crumpled to the floor.

“Aha! You suffocated them! So we *can* take them down with magic!”

One of the knights, who had seen the true purpose of Shiori’s spell, cast a fire spell of his own. It was far and away a much stronger spell than Shiori’s. In order to keep the strength of the flames from spreading, another knight cast a water barrier. After a time, the wolves within the fiery cage collapsed, and the knights shared a nod among themselves.

“Amazing work, mage!” said the knight, grinning as he wiped the blood running from his forehead. “We can use this to help support the injured!”

Shiori replied with a smile of her own, then glanced back at the town square. Several knights had fallen just below her. She saw Alec gulping down the contents of a health vial while taking cover behind Rurii, and noticed traces of exhaustion in him.

Shiori also took a moment to drink a magical energy recovery potion. By this point, she’d lost count of how many she’d consumed. She let out a short breath and readied herself.

The knights next to her once again cast their magic. She felt jealousy whirl within her at how much more powerful they were than her, even though she was a mage. Her own magic was only suited to

daily living: drying wet clothes and hair, creating a warm bath, and igniting the very simplest of fires. She had none of the power necessary to deal a killing blow through attack magic. Once more she felt vexed and frustrated that her only means of attack was indirect and time-consuming, whittling down her enemy little by little.

Shiori cast another Blaze Cage, trapping a small group of wolves. She felt the magic drain from her, and fought back against the weakness she felt in her legs. By the time the final wolf fell, her magical energy had been depleted to about half of her reserves.

That was five of them, maybe six.

Including the wolves that Alec and the knights at the caravan had taken down, they'd defeated perhaps half of the pack. She let the spell dissipate—she'd used a lot of magical energy and would need to recuperate.

But at that very moment, she heard a howl from afar. As if in response, the wolves in the town square raised their heads and howled also. Worried voices rose around her.

“Oh no...more of them?!”

“When are our reinforcements coming?! We won't be able to hold the wolves back if we have to deal with another pack!”

“Those idiot merchants... What the hell did they do in the forest?!”



Alec and Rurii had also noticed the howls of the coming pack. Alec swung his sword in a wide arc to stop the pack's attack and create some distance so he could look towards the forest. In the next instant, Shiori felt his wandering gaze lock on her own. Even from afar, she saw the strength glimmering in his eyes. He had not given up yet. He had every intention of continuing to fight.

But then...

"Ahh!"

She became aware of an agonized commotion around her. A group of the knights surrounding the caravan had fallen, and the snow wolves were piling in as a result. If left unaddressed, the beasts would likely swarm the inn holding the merchants.

"Wait... They're going for the caravans...?"

This realization came from Anika. The pack of wolves were aiming not for the inn which held the merchants, but rather leaping towards the covered wagons. But soon enough, it became clear they had their sights set on one wagon in particular. A knight turned a stern gaze onto the wagon. He was wrapped in rough bandages, stained with blood that still dripped from his arms.

"Is that the source of all this?" he asked. "Is there something in that wagon?"

"Stop them! Don't touch that wagon!"

This voice came from a different building, from a man shouting from a window. Shiori saw the others around him trying to hold him back. Anika clicked her tongue in frustration.

"How can they still act like that?! Don't they see what's happening?!"

"Looks like they still have their people hidden among the villagers and tourists," muttered the knight bitterly. "Once this is over, we'll have to lock down the village and weed out the rest of them."

"Then we have to find some way to stop this before more snow wolves arrive..." Shiori cried. That caravan must have been the reason the usually reserved snow wolves had attacked this village. As she spoke, she turned her attention to it. "Shall we investigate that wagon?"

"Is it possible?"

"It might be a bit heavy-handed to do so, but I can raise it off the ground with my earth magic. If it's just the one wagon, I think I can handle it."

The knight considered for a moment, but ultimately nodded. He knew they didn't have much time.

"Do it!" he said.

"Okay!"

When Shiori looked more closely, she saw that the wagon was reinforced and strengthened with metal fittings. Even at a glance she knew it was quite heavy. Exactly how heavy, however, she couldn't tell. What was certain was that it would take a lot of her magical energy. She focused on the wagon, then let her magic flow.

“Earthen Rise!”

She felt the majority of her magical energy leave her as the earth directly beneath the wagon began to rise. A rumbling echoed through the air, and a number of wolves clinging to the wagon were shaken loose from the shock. Shiori's breath grew ragged as she felt the weight of the wagon through her magic. But she didn't let herself hesitate—the wagon wasn't yet high enough. She scrambled a hand into her pouch for a magical energy recovery potion and gulped it down. Then she cast the spell again.

The snow wolves still clinging to the wagon were knocked loose by hunting bows and with the support of the knights, and they fell back down to the town square. Once she was sure they were no threat, Shiori created a path to the wagon. Together with a group of knights, she ran to it, and quickly rolled up the canvas material hiding what lay inside. Within the wagon, they found thick cloth blankets piled atop each other, concealing something.

“What is that?” asked one of the knights.

It was an uncommon sight to find inside of wagons delivering materials, and it filled everyone with apprehension and suspicion. Still, they had little time. Cautiously, they began to roll up the blankets. As soon as they spotted the steel cage beneath the blankets, they noticed an intensely sweet aroma drifting from it. But it wasn't the sort of scent that would whet the appetite; rather, there was something sickening about it. The few men standing nearest to the cage collapsed on the spot.

“It's sleeping gas!” yelled another. “Don't breathe it in!”

Everyone rushed to cover their mouths and noses.

“Let me air out the space!” said Shiori.

“Good idea! Make it quick!”

Thus given permission, she cast a wind magic spell.

“Whirlwind Slash!”

The roof and sides of the wagon were sliced open by the air, gaping into big holes. The air from outside flowed in, dispersing the gas leaking out from under the blankets.

“These are...snow wolves?!”

Inside the cage were a number of snow wolves, lying on their sides and quite still. Their chests moved almost imperceptibly. They were breathing, which meant they were alive.

At that instant, the snow wolves surrounding them let out

ferocious howls. Their cries were filled with rage. It would seem they had chased down the caravan because their fellow wolves had been taken from the pack.

“Please...let me take a closer look,” said an old man, pushing his way through the group.

He was certainly getting on in age, but he approached the cage with a confident gait, kneeling to observe the wolves more closely.

“They’re all young females,” he said, “and it looks to me that they’re all pregnant. See how some of the bellies appear swollen?”

“So that explains it,” said a knight in a low voice. “These wolves are here to take back their mates, then.”

It was a natural reaction. Anyone who learned that their pregnant wife had been kidnapped would fight tooth and nail to get them back. This was all the more true for snow wolves, which were fiercely loyal to their packs.

“We must return them,” said the old man. “These magical beasts are not heartless and bloodthirsty. They do not shed blood without reason. If we are lucky, it will be enough to get them to retreat back to their homes. That is, if it quiets their anger at all.”

Once more, the howls of snow wolves rang from outside the village. They were even closer now. There was barely any time to think.

“We need to unlock the cage! Then we can let the wolves down!”

A knight standing by the cage nodded. He waited until those affected by the gas had been carried back over to the roof, then raised his sword and brought it down upon the cage lock. The sword’s design made it clear that it was magical, and the reinforced blade only needed a few hits to send the steel lock flying. The knight opened the cage door and got away from the wagon, at which point Shiori lowered it back towards the ground, returning it to its original location.

The wolf pack had already begun to calm. They watched as the wagon was lowered, then approached the cage. A few wolves—likely the leaders of the pack, based on their larger frames—cautiously entered. They nudged gently at their respective partners with their noses, then helped each other to load the sleeping wolves on their backs.

The leader of the pack of snow wolves let out a bark. The message to the others was clear, and they began to leave the town square. Most likely they were heading home. The one wolf that stayed until the end turned back to look at the square. In its eyes were rage and sorrow. The snow wolves had succeeded in retrieving their loved ones, and however much their anger still raged, they had no wish to sacrifice any more of their pack to battle. The wolf let a short breath escape its

nose, and then ran off, carrying its partner on its back. It left a solemn scene in its wake, with many watching on breathlessly.

The forest was silent. The howling had stopped.

The attack of the fearsome snow wolves thus came to a quiet end.

Chapter 2: Love Ending, Love Beginning

1

It wasn't until the last wolf had left that anybody dared to speak. "Is it... Is it over?" somebody asked.

The words seemed to mark the end of the ordeal, and the tension in the air began to ease. Some people collapsed where they stood, some let out long tired breaths as they looked to the sky, and others returned their weapons to their sheaths, their minds still in a daze. But all of them bore injuries—scars from battle.

Alec swung his sword to clear it of excess blood and flesh, then sheathed it and hurried to Shiori. He felt pain run through his arms and legs, but it was nothing serious. He needed to be with her as soon as possible. Rurii bounced along after him, now back to its usual blue in color.

"Shiori!" he shouted.

She was helping the injured knights get down from the rooftop, but her face opened into a smile of relief when she saw him. She said something to the knights, then ran to Alec, who wrapped her in a hug. In the safety of those arms, she allowed herself the slightest sigh.

"Are you okay? You must have cast spell after spell back there..."

Alec put a hand to Shiori's pale cheek. Since arriving in the village, her use of magic had been almost nonstop. First she provided aid, then she provided attack support, then she helped to release the caravan's "cargo." In the last half of the battle, she'd had to use a lot of magical energy.

However, a gentle, reassuring smile filled Shiori's face.

"I'm fine. I'm tired, but unhurt. That said, I have a stomachache; I think I drank too many magical energy recovery potions." She said the last line as a joke, but then her eyebrows drooped with concern. "But enough about me. How about you and Rurii? You look like you're injured."

"Nothing more than scratches. I'll be fine, and Rurii will too. Its scratches are already healing."

Rurii bounced on the spot as if to confirm Alec's comment. The slime had been bitten and scratched in the battle, but the marks had little effect on its already flexible body. Unless it was hit by powerful

magic or the core at its center was destroyed somehow, the slime would be just fine.

“You did great, Rurii. Would you like some water?”

Usually the slime would have been overjoyed at the offer, but this time it wobbled side to side as if to decline her offer.

“Oh, I see. You’re, um...already full...”

Shiori elected not to ask what the slime was full of. She had a feeling it was better for her own mental health not to know.

“Alec, let me see to your wounds. Once they’re disinfected, some ointment and bandages should do the trick, I think.”

“Ah, yes, you’re right. Thank you.”

His scratches would be fine so long as they were properly disinfected. There was no need to involve the village doctors, who were sure to have their hands full taking care of the other injured.

Shiori extracted a simple first aid box from her pouch and took care of his wounds. She did so with a well-practiced, careful hand, explaining that she’d learned first aid from Nils. It seemed clear she’d had to see to the wounds of other companions on her various expeditions.

“There we go,” she said. “But it’s amazing to think you got through that battle with little more than scratches.”

“I was lucky enough to be fighting from the outskirts of the pack, where I could attack from behind. That’s all it was.”

He was only being modest, though, and Shiori’s eyebrows fell dejectedly.

“I wish *I* could fight,” she said.

It bothered her that all she was capable of was support. Her sigh was one colored with feelings of self-deprecation and envy. As a vanguard, Alec could only imagine how Shiori felt, and her worries at being only a support. Still, he felt the need to tell her how he felt.

“Everyone fights differently,” he said. “And you did the best you could. Because of you, I learned how to take down those snow wolves. And don’t forget what you did; not only were you quick to take care of the wounded, but you helped to release the kidnapped snow wolves too.”

He took her hand and squeezed it tight.

“Vanguards like me can only fight at our best because we have support positions looking out for us. Have confidence in yourself.”

Rurii bounced into the air in agreement. Seeing the slime do so brought the smile back to Shiori’s face.

“Thank you. You’re too kind, the both of you. I feel a little better.”

“Just a little, huh...”

Just as a wry grin drew itself upon Alec’s face, they heard the neighing and hoofbeats of horses riding quickly towards them. The

knights ran to the town square. Finally, reinforcements had arrived...in the form of just six horses.

They really are struggling for support...

Alec's brow furrowed. It was only natural that they were struggling. If a neighboring village were to be attacked by magical beasts, the garrison there still needed to make sure they had enough manpower to defend themselves. The refugee issue was also leaving many places understaffed. Alec knew that they'd sent as many reinforcements as they could.

The knights on horseback looked around in confusion and surprise. Around them were injured knights crouching on the ground, the corpses of snow wolves strewn across the streets, and a wagon with its covers torn to shreds, the cage within it broken open. It also shocked them to find that it was all over.

"Is the Brovito Village garrison captain around?"

The knight asked this question as he got down from his horse. Clearly he was the man in charge. An injured knight came forward, held up by others. He had severe lacerations to his stomach and arms, and his fresh bandages were already stained with blood. The knights who had just arrived ran to his aid. It was clear the man was at the very limits of exhaustion. His ghostly pale face and unfocused gaze told the story of his ordeal. But even then, it seemed he wanted to at least report the situation himself.

"I apologize for my pitiful state..." he said, "but I wanted to give you the particulars directly."

"Understood."

His words came out intermittently, his story told in an exhausted trickle. Though the vice-captain would usually take charge in times of emergency, he had been badly wounded in the early stages of the assault and had been taken off the front lines. With both commanding officers out of action, command was thus given temporarily to the captain of the reinforcements.

There was a mountain of work to be done. A first aid area had to be set up for the injured, and those critically injured needed to be moved to the capital. The beast corpses across town had to be cleaned up, and then the area had to be investigated. The village also needed to be locked down so the caravan merchants could be properly identified and arrested.

The garrison knights were already understaffed, but it was all too clear there weren't enough hands to help. Not with so many so badly injured, certainly. A courier had been sent from a neighboring village to Tris, but it was unlikely support would arrive any sooner than the evening. For now, they had to make do with whoever was capable.

"I know you adventurers must be exhausted, but I'd like to ask for

your support.”

The knight captain could see that Alec and Shiori were still capable of work. He introduced himself as Caspar Selander, and he looked genuinely apologetic for putting them in this predicament.

“Of course,” said Alec. “Use us as you see fit. We’ve already heard about the situation from the knights here.”

“You have my thanks. Still, to think that humans were the source of such a calamity...”

Caspar spat the words as if this were the last thing he needed when manpower was already so low.

“For starters, we’ll set up the first aid tents and round up all the merchants that were involved. We’ll have to temporarily lock down the village, which means we’ll need some people on guard.”

“The local garrison and villagers are the best people to put on guard to watch for the coming and going of anyone unusual. We also can’t rule out the possibility of another snow wolf attack, or even a few stray wolves returning. If you enlist the help of villagers, it’s best to call on those who can handle themselves.”

“That’s a good point,” said Caspar with a grin. “I think we can leave internal patrols to the villagers, but I’d like to ask for your help with seeing to the village outskirts.”

Alec and the other adventurers nodded in agreement.

“Can we start gathering the fallen snow wolves now? If it’s okay for us to have them, we’d like to start figuring out what we can use as soon as possible.”

This question was from Anika, prodding to see if they could help in this way. She knew that the longer they left the snow wolf corpses out, the quicker they would go bad. Caspar, understanding the need to be flexible, gave his permission.

“I’ll send a knight with you. Let him inspect the wolves first. After that, they’re yours to do with as you please. Given that there’s so many of them, you’ll be doing us a favor by getting rid of them.”

“Thank you, sir knight. You heard the man, let’s get to it!”

Anika led some villagers to the snow wolves with one of Caspar’s knights in tow. The remaining villagers began to disperse as they were given their orders.

“Once I’ve filled in the holes in the town square, I’ll help with the first aid,” said Shiori. “If you need clean or boiled water, I can make it immediately, and I can help with smaller wounds if I’m given some instruction. I can also use my earth magic to make simple beds if necessary.”

“That would be a huge help. Thank you so much.”

Caspar was glad for whatever help he could get, and it showed on his face. However, Alec frowned.

“Don’t push yourself, Shiori,” he said. “You must be tired after all of that. You need to take a break.”

Shiori looked pained.

“We’re *all* tired,” she said, her eyebrows drooping. “Even you went on fighting from start to finish. I’ll be fine, and if it gets to be too much, I’ll make sure to rest. I’ll be fine as long as I can stand.”

Shiori smiled. And however Alec looked at it, they *were* in the midst of an emergency. Everybody here was pushing themselves in some way or another, and they were still going. Alec had no choice but to let her do the same.

“My friend,” a villager standing nearby piped up, “I understand your concern for the girl, but trust her a little, yeah?”

Alec sighed and nodded bitterly.

“Fine. But please, really, don’t push yourself,” he said. “Rurii, I need you to stand guard.”

Rurii wobbled in affirmation.

“Stand guard...?” said Shiori. A slight frown flashed across her face, but it was quickly replaced by her usual gentle smile. “Thank you, Alec.”

“Mhm.”

Alec watched as Shiori left with the knights who were to set up the first aid area. He sighed once more, then moved towards the village entrance at Caspar’s urging. Later, he would think back on this decision with crushing regret. He would wish that he had looked a little more carefully, and that he had noticed the subtle ways in which she protected her left arm.

And he would also come to understand something.

Shiori pushes herself beyond her limits, and she’s learned how to hide it.

It was the true meaning of the words Clemens once spoke, when he had talked of Shiori’s limits.

“Really? You promise that if I’m a good boy you’ll let me touch you?” asked the young boy.

He was being held in his mother’s arms. Rurii wobbled its response: “*But of course.*” The boy had fallen while trying to evacuate and twisted his ankle. He was terrified of first aid because he didn’t want to go through any more pain than he already had. Unfortunately, his foot had swollen and bruised a dark blue.

All the same, he was instantly intrigued by the slime as it bounced around the tents. He agreed to let the doctors see to him in exchange for a chance to pet Rurii. The first aid medic worked quickly as the boy happily touched the slime here and there.

“Thank you! I hope you’ll let me touch you again!”

Afterwards, they watched the boy as he was carried off by his mother, his mood noticeably brighter.

“You sure are a smart one,” said the medic. “You really saved me a lot of trouble.”

Rurii trembled in place: “*Think nothing of it!*” it seemed to say, raising smiles from those around it. The first aid tents were a gloomy place, filled with a nervous hustle and bustle, and the slime was all too glad to provide a moment of levity.

“Wouldn’t mind a slime assistant myself. Something to keep the kids from feeling frightened. It’s tough work, sometimes.”

Honestly, it felt pretty good to be told as much by the village doctor.

Rurii turned its attention back to Shiori, who was hard at work creating clean, hot water. She was busy with all the bandages and wash basins that had been brought in. She sterilized them with boiled water, dried them, then hurriedly took them to the medics and women assisting with the first aid. But there were too many injured and not enough bandages. In the middle of her work, Shiori was called because they’d run out of beds, so she used her magic to raise the earth and make simple beds for those who needed them.

She was exhausted, and yet except for her pale complexion, Shiori went about her work with the gentle smile she always wore. Though this was most certainly one of her strengths, it was also her weakness. No matter how hard things were for her, she hid it beautifully. She overcame things with focus and willpower, and made sure not to falter or fall where people could see her. It was a great worry for Rurii, who had the feeling there was something compelling Shiori to insist on this behavior.

Though they could not communicate through language, Shiori understood everything Rurii wanted to say. Yet, the one thing she continued to pretend not to notice was when the slime insisted that she rest.

As was the case right now.

Rurii looked up at Shiori. Since just a little while ago, the slime had felt something just slightly off. It was something the slime understood because they were always together. There was the slightest awkwardness in her movements. It was as if she were taking extra care with the left side of her body.

The slime was left with a choice: find out more, or report to Alec.

Rurii was just pondering the two choices when a man in crutches attempted to pass by Shiori’s side. He lost his balance and fell, pulling at Shiori on his way down. Rurii stretched itself out underneath them to buffer their fall. The man fell directly on top of Rurii, so fortunately he got through without further injury. He was helped back to his feet

by the people around him.

"Wh... What the...? Oh, you're the mage's familiar. Thanks. I owe you one," said the man casually.

But Rurii was no longer listening. Shiori wasn't moving. Her right arm trembled sporadically as she clutched her left. Her pale face had broken out into a sweat, and her breaths were short.

"Miss Shiori? Are you okay?"

A knight ran over, noticing that something was wrong, but Shiori did not answer.

What's going on? Did she hurt herself? No, it's her left arm...

"Her arm... No, has she been hiding it ever since...?! Damn it, she really was injured!"

"Ever since"? Ever since when? Shiori was injured? When did that happen?

"Quickly! Take her to an available tent!"

"She was traveling with someone—a man! Somebody go get him!"

One of the knights who remembered Alec nodded and dashed off. Rurii approached the medic's feet as he carried Shiori in his arms. The slime was trembling.

"It'll be okay," the medic said to Rurii. "You can rest assured we'll do everything we can to help your master."

The medic was trying to give the slime hope, and yet...all Rurii could think was that it had been unable to protect its dearest friend.

2

"Hopefully the snow wolves won't attack again. Last thing we need is another round of that," said the villager with a sigh.

Alec was leading a group patrolling the area at the edge of the Blue Forest. He looked at the simple fence of barrier stakes that had been erected around the village to keep magical beasts out.

"Indeed," he said, nodding.

It was rare for the creatures of the forest to ever approach human settlements. And as far as Brovito's recorded history was concerned, they had never once had to deal with a pack of magical beasts. The village was largely safe and secure, and the few times a stray or curious beast had come close, the village hunters had taken care of them.

It would have been one thing if the village had high walls like the capital of Tris, but as it stood, Brovito's simple fence would not be enough to stop the snow wolves from attacking again. The balance of the forest had been disrupted, and it was hard not to fear the possibility that other rare magical beasts might show up. Measures also had to be taken against unscrupulous types who might use the

village's state of confusion to loot and steal.

Knowing there were a great many injured and not a lot of available hands, Alec and the others had split into groups. Each group was led by a knight or adventurer, and the village's volunteers were divided between them. They had then set about patrolling the area around the village.

At present, the village was in temporary lockdown so that anybody related to the caravan incident could be rounded up. Locking down the village caused some unrest among the tourists and travelers who happened to be passing through, but still, everyone remained quite calm. Many offered to help track down the suspects, and were allowed to do so on the strict condition that they did not resort to vigilante-style punishment. At this rate it looked as though the lockdown might end before evening. For those that had to be moved quickly to the capital or neighboring villages, a single horse and cart was being used especially for this purpose.

Never imagined I'd get pulled into something like this when I agreed to accompany Shiori.

Lost in thought, Alec continued to survey the immediate area. Then he heard the footsteps of someone hurrying towards him.

"Excuse me, adventurer!"

As the man drew closer, Alec saw that he was a young knight.

"You're traveling with Miss Shiori, yes?"

The young man was out of breath. Something had happened. Alec's heart grew unsettled.

"I am. What's going on?"

"She's... She's been injured."

It was as though a pail of ice water had been emptied over Alec's head. He was frozen.

"Injured?" he asked. "At the first aid tents?"

"No, it seems it happened earlier. There was some kind of altercation with the merchants from the caravan."

Alec felt his teeth grind in his mouth. To think it was not snow wolves, but humans...and *those* humans, no less.

"What happened?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know the particulars. In any case, I'll take over here, so please go to the first aid tents. It seems she was injured quite badly. The medics will know more."

"Got it. Thanks!"

Keeping his reply short, Alec took off without a second glance.

The first aid area was set up on the outskirts of the village. When Alec asked, he was directed to a tent in the area for the critically injured.

The critically injured...

He took off running, trying to silence the impatient anxiety in his heart, but was stopped in front of the tent by the guard standing at the entrance.

“Just a moment,” said the guard. “You are the traveling partner of Miss Shiori, correct?”

“Yes. The name’s Alec. Where is she?”

“They’re taking care of her right now, inside. But before I can take you to her we’ve got some questions for you.”

“Questions? Could you make them quick?”

Alec didn’t even try to hide his impatience as the knight ushered him into the tent. The moment Alec stepped inside, a waiting knight quickly closed off the entrance. A curtain hung in the middle of the tent between Alec and the operating area, and standing in front of the curtain was Caspar. The knight gave him an intimidating stare, pausing him where he stood.

“What is this about?” Alec asked.

“Some suspicious marks were found on Miss Shiori’s body during her treatment. She also tried to refuse our care entirely. Her reaction was anything but natural. She broke down entirely—lost all composure. We had no choice but to sedate her. Given this information, you must understand us wanting to ask you a few questions.”

“Suspicious marks? A breakdown...?”

Alec couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Caspar went on.

“First things first. Are you engaged to Miss Shiori, or in a similar kind of relationship?”

“No... We’re work companions. For now, anyway.”

“I see...”

Caspar’s lip curled cynically. It might have been a smile. He went on.

“Next. Have you ever intentionally injured a woman, or used scarring as a means of coercion?”

The question felt like an insult, part of an interrogation, and Alec’s pointed glare ran straight through Caspar.

“What the hell?! Of course I haven’t.”

A spark ran through the air, ripe with danger, and the knight behind Alec flinched at the change in atmosphere.

“Last question,” said Caspar. “Was Miss Shiori purchased through illegal trafficking within the country, or released from a brothel providing unlawful services?”

“What the hell is this?!”

There was no mistaking it now—this was clearly an interrogation, and for a crime Alec had no knowledge of. But to hear her called a

slave, a prostitute...Caspar's words enraged him.

"She's not a slave, and she's not a prostitute! She's none of those things! She's an ordinary girl. She's..."

Caspar remained silent, watching Alec closely. His gaze was probing. For a time, the two men glared at one another. Finally, Caspar let out a sigh.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Immigrants are always at a disadvantage, you see. And some of them—the women—they are pressured and forced into selling themselves. The marks on Miss Shiori are not unlike similar kinds of scarring. That is why your answers were important; we needed to know if you should be taken into custody."

Alec was left near speechless.

"What...?" he uttered.

Was it even possible that Shiori was...

Caspar gave the pale, dumbstruck Alec a pained look of sympathy, then motioned at the curtain behind him with his jaw.

"Come with me. She's been taken care of and she's sleeping. That said, please prepare yourself for what you are about to see."

Caspar's ominous words struck Alec with a strange, unplaceable impatience, and it was all he could do to maintain his composure as he passed through to the other side of the curtain.

The room smelled of disinfectant, and was lit by the gentle light of a single magic lantern. Shiori lay on a simple bed, asleep. Her face was so pale that if not for the subtle rise and fall of her chest, one would think she was dead. Alec drew closer and looked down at her. The damp eyelashes, the red around her eyes. Her cheeks were damp.

When she broke down...she was crying?

At Shiori's feet, Rurii was deflated and almost gaunt. The slime was in low spirits. Alec could sense that it blamed itself for not noticing Shiori's injuries. The slime gave a single, lifeless shiver.

"Let's start with the most recent injury," said the military physician standing by her side.

He rolled up Shiori's left sleeve and removed a compress bandage that wafted with the scent of peppermint. Alec felt his breath catch in his throat when he saw the bruise that blemished the upper part of her smooth, white arm. It poked up and out, swollen and colored a blackish blue.

"This... This is..." A horrid memory ran through Alec's mind. He had seen injuries just like this when he was undercover in the Empire. Feeling the urge to be sick, he put a hand to his mouth. "It's a lash mark, isn't it?"

"It is," said the physician. He went on in grave tones.

"Fortunately, there appears to be no bone damage, though from the look of the swelling, there's a chance she may have damage to the

muscle tissue. That said, without the help of a physicker, the best we can do for now is keep the injury cool.”

According to the physician, most of the knight squad’s physickers had been dispatched to the refugee camps. The rest were at the capital. Some were coming with the other reinforcements, but they would not arrive until well into the evening. There were also many other people who had been critically injured and were in need of help. With that in mind, there was no way of knowing when a physicker could take a proper look at Shiori. Alec hoped that someone had been dispatched from the Adventurer’s Guild.

As Alec listened to the explanation, he gently reached for Shiori’s pale fingertips. He wrapped her fingers in his own with the greatest care, as though even the slightest movement might make her pain worse.

“According to witnesses at the scene, she was attacked during an argument with the merchants,” said Caspar. “We have reports of them in similar incidents with the knight squads too, so they’ll be charged for both obstruction of public duty, and their attack on Miss Shiori.”

But the words barely registered with Alec.

Why did she carry this wound for so long? No, how...?

“How did an injury like this go completely unnoticed...?” he asked.

Neither Alec nor Rurii had noticed. Nobody else had either. Shiori’s perseverance was otherworldly. Why did she feel she had to hide it for so long?

“The answer to your question can be found in what she said during her breakdown. It is also made clear by the other injuries on her body. However...for her to hide these scars for so long means she must have truly otherworldly grit.”

“Other...injuries...?”

The physician rolled Shiori’s sleeve up further, revealing her delicate upper arm. It was soft, so much softer than his own, and...

Alec was once again at a loss for words. He reached out with trembling fingers and touched her. Her smooth skin was covered in unnatural scarring. He’d seen these before too. They were lacerations that had healed. Battle scars.

“You don’t know anything about these, correct?”

“It’s the first time I’ve seen them...”

“For a knight or an adventurer to carry scars is, on its own, not particularly strange,” said Caspar. “However, in this case the location of the scars is. They’re concentrated either above the elbow or above the knees. Fortunately she isn’t scarred elsewhere, but that in itself is still very odd.”

“All of the scars come from magical beasts,” added the physician.

“We did not find any blade scarring. We believe all of these scars were received within the last two years. There is nothing outright suspicious about the injuries themselves, but the span of time during which she must have received them, and the location of the scars, leaves us with questions.”

“As a result, we suspect that Miss Shiori was subjected to abuse of some kind over a select period of time. And we know that certain prostitution establishments coerce their workers with scars to ensure they do not run away. These establishments tell their workers that scarred women have nowhere to go—that they are discriminated against. It’s a common tactic, used to keep immigrant workers quiet. You understand, yes?”

“I do...”

Trapped in an abusive environment for a number of years, with no place to go...

It described Shiori perfectly.

“When she broke down, what did she say?” asked Alec.

She was always calm, and even at the hardest of times she hid it all behind a smile. She was not one to allow herself to cry in front of others. Alec simply couldn’t imagine her breaking down. Caspar stared at him for a time, then looked back down at Shiori.

“She said... ‘You can’t tell Alec, he’ll abandon me if he knows about my scars. I can’t go on if he throws me away.’”

“I... I see...”

Her value to him was not something that changed on the basis of her having scars. She was smart enough to know that, and yet it was clear as day that she had not been able to rid herself of the neurotic fear and uncertainty that had taken root inside of her.

Caspar let out a deep sigh, then signaled with his eyes for the physician to leave.

“I would like to talk with Miss Shiori once she wakes up and is sufficiently calm,” he said. “She may be the victim of a crime, and I cannot let such treatment go unaddressed.”

“Is it possible to do so without pressuring her too hard? If there are things you wish to know...there may still be written records with the Tris Adventurers’ Guild, or the capital’s knights. She was caught up in an incident with her last adventuring party. There’s no doubt that foul play was a part of it, but no members of the party were ever charged.”

“At the very least, I’d like to hear her side of things. I will be careful not to push her too hard.”

Alec slumped into a simple chair by Shiori’s side. Caspar patted him on the shoulder.

“You’ve had a long day, and you’ve been working nonstop. It

would be wise for you to take a break. I'll make sure the two of you are left alone. If anything happens, just speak to the guard outside of the tent."

Alec was too exhausted to even respond to Caspar's kind words. The knight gave him another reaffirming pat on the shoulder, then quietly left the tent.

All that remained was silence.

How much time had passed since his conversation with Caspar? The noise that seeped in from outside the tent had dissipated, and the lights illuminating the tent walls had gone out. But all Alec knew was that night had fallen.

The effect of the sedatives should already have worn off, and yet Shiori remained asleep, perhaps due to the built-up exhaustion of having hit her magic limit.

Alec took her hand in his own. Without words, it was all he had left. The glimmering bracelet on her left wrist—a gift he had given her as a talisman—felt suddenly, painfully, empty.

Caspar had told him to rest, and yet he did not feel as if he could. He heard people near the tent, followed by whispering voices. Then, the entrance to the tent rolled up.

"Alec..."

It was a voice Alec knew well. He looked up to find familiar faces staring back at him.

"Nils... Ellen."

The two smiled gently and walked towards the bed, where they began preparing for treatment.

"The capital's knights are at their limits. They made an emergency request to the Guild. We came along in a caravan filled with aid supplies. A few others came with us."

"There are still many patients awaiting treatment, but the knight—Caspar, was it?—he was kind enough to send us here, first."

Alec stepped back, and Ellen began her examination immediately. When he asked, he found out she had a surgery certification. As for Nils, he was a certified doctor. Far more than just a herbalist physician, Nils had saved a great many lives with his wealth of knowledge. It was a relief to have both of them here with him.

"This may cause some pain. Could you help me to restrain Shiori for a moment?"

Nils and Alec held Shiori's shoulders and arms down while Ellen felt around the injured part of her arm. Shiori let out a pained moan and her body went tense.

"The bruising is quite bad, but there's no bone damage. We can heal her with physicking."

“That’s good news,” said Nils. “It means you won’t need any of my medicines.”

When physicking was used on broken bones that had moved out of place or otherwise bent out of shape, they healed in that same twisted form. This was why physickers with medical certification were so important; they had the knowledge to make the best decisions on how to treat injuries.

Ellen held her right hand over the injured part of Shiori’s arm. A warm, gentle, milky-white light wrapped around her skin, returning it back to its natural color. All that was left when the physicking light had dissipated was Shiori’s smooth skin. There was no longer any trace of the painful bruise left by the lash.

Alec let out a sigh of relief. He felt ready to collapse from both relief and exhaustion, but there was still something he had to ask.

“Can you heal wounds that are one or two years old?”

Nils knew what Alec was talking about, but Ellen tilted her head slightly, puzzled by the question. She didn’t know about Shiori’s other injuries.

“Unfortunately, I can’t heal that which has scarred over the passing of time. Even the powers of physicking have limits.”

“Of course...”

So the scars could not be erased. Alec hadn’t been expecting much, but even then he couldn’t help feeling some despair at Ellen’s answer.

“It goes without saying, but physicking draws from the patient’s own strength to speed the healing process. Shiori will be tired after going through this, so be sure to let her rest.”

“Understood. And thanks.”

When Nils said he had something to discuss with Alec, Ellen told him to call her if anything happened, then quickly left.

For a time, silence filled the tent.

“If you’re asking about scars from one or two years ago,” said Nils finally, “then you’ve seen *them*, haven’t you?”

“I had no idea,” Alec forced the words out huskily. “Not even Zack told me...”

“Because he couldn’t. His most precious little sister, her body covered in scars... It was too much.”

Alec felt like he understood now why Zack was so insistent that Alec keep away from her. Perhaps he didn’t want Alec to see the damage that had been wrought upon her.

“Even with scars like these,” Alec said, “even with how unnatural they are... Even then, no one was charged?”

“All of those scars came from magical beasts. I remember them well because I was there when she was first examined. There’s no

mistaking those marks; they are from the fangs and claws of beasts.”

Nils said that because of this fact, the scars could not be used as evidence in a case, regardless of how strange they were.

“There are a few records that show Shiori received treatment at a free medical clinic. Outside of that, it would appear she endured the pain of the other injuries and treated them on her own. Perhaps it was something difficult for her to talk about.”

Alec’s questioning gaze pierced into Nils, who let out a sigh and continued.

“The doctor who saw to her the last time she went for treatment still remembers seeing her. She’d sustained a terrible injury to her back while protecting a female companion, but apparently the other party members said it was her own fault. The doctor remembered the incident because of the way they talked about their own party member, and one who had protected a companion, no less. They called her a waste of party funds and a burden. If that’s how her own party members treated her, it’s no wonder she couldn’t say anything.”

The room filled with a painful, heavy silence. When Alec thought about the words she spoke at the time of her breakdown, he knew there was more to it. But right now there were other things on his mind. Namely, what Caspar had said about Shiori potentially having been put in a position where she had to sell herself.

“You said you were there for her examination,” said Alec.

“Hm? Yes, I was.”

“In which case, I want to ask you something.”

He wasn’t sure if this was the place to ask such a question, but he simply had to know.

“Did you find any...”

But the remaining words clung to his throat.

“What is it, Alec?”

Nils waited for him to continue. Alec gathered himself and went on.

“Did you find any signs of...rape or sexual abuse?”

Nils took a breath. For a moment he hesitated, but after a time he spoke.

“Perhaps it’s the only light in an otherwise dark story, but no, we didn’t find anything. At the very least, there were no signs of that kind of abuse over the last few years. This is according to the analysis of the midwife we’d called.”

Alec let out another sigh of relief.

“I... I see...”

“When we saw her condition, Zack and the examining doctor were worried about the exact same thing. If they had found anything at all, you can bet her party would not have gotten away with an acquittal of

any sort.”

“Ah... That...makes sense.”

Of course. Shiori’s old party were never prosecuted. They were blamed and suspected of foul play within the Guild itself, but no official prosecution ever took place. There was not one thing they could have been taken to court for with regards to Shiori’s treatment.

An especially pained grin appeared on Nils’s face.

“I’ll tell you what was especially difficult,” he said. “Trying to stop Zack after he saw the injuries. He was so crazed with rage, he could have killed someone with his aura alone.”

Alec knew Zack would have been furious at the people who had let Shiori come to such harm, but he also knew that much of Zack’s anger would have been directed inward—he would have hated himself for not noticing it when it was happening, and for letting Shiori’s treatment go on for as long as it did. Though the party had been careful to make sure Shiori was out of the reach of her friends, there was no doubt he felt enraged and ashamed at himself for not noticing the changes in the woman he loved.

Because of the feeling of powerlessness that tortured Alec himself in this moment, he could easily imagine how Zack had felt, seeing those wounds just moments after they had been healed.

“Pardon me, Mr. Nils,” came a voice, “but we should be moving on, soon.”

It was the knight on guard, poking his head in through the tent entrance.

“Thank you, understood. I’ll be ready in just a moment.”

“Thank you, sir,” said the guard, leaving them once more alone.

Alec watched on vaguely as Nils went about packing his medicine box and equipment. Nils turned a searching gaze on him.

“Alec,” he said.

“Hm...?”

“There are rumors floating around about you and Shiori, but what’s the real story there?”

For Nils, who was usually so thoughtful and discreet, this was surprisingly direct. Alec could only manage a wry grin—to think that his relationship with Shiori had been so clear to everyone that it had become rumor.

“I’m still working on it,” he said.

“Ah, I see.”

Smiling, Nils passed Alec a medicine bottle. He said it was a special nutritional supplement.

“Drink this,” he said. “It’ll make you feel better. You look exhausted, and with a face like that, you’re only going to make her worry when she wakes up.”

“Ah, thanks.”

Alec took the bottle gladly and drained it in a gulp. For a moment he caught a strange and earthy medicinal scent.

“Ugh... That’s quite the flavor,” he said with a frown.

“Yeah, but it works.”

Nils’s flaxen hair shook as he laughed. Then he turned his gaze on Shiori.

“That incident... It left deep scars on everyone. Everyone felt like something wasn’t right, but we all found our own reasons to let it go on.”

Nils and the others had noticed each change: they saw Shiori’s meager equipment, the fact she was the only one missing at party celebrations, how she went out of her way to avoid others, and how she stopped showing her face at the Guild whenever possible. Each thing, taken by itself, was minor, and it was for that reason that nobody pursued the matter any further.

“I knew she was buying more medicine from me than any one person could use. But even then, I put it down to being just one of those things—something that people did... I found excuses, I let it go on, and the results were just as we saw.” Nils paused to let another bitter look cross his features. “If anybody had moved a little faster, it never would have happened. We feel responsible. And she senses this from us, which is why she holds herself back. I know it’s awful, but...we can’t help her with the pain she struggles with. Even now. All we can do is watch over her and ensure she is not scarred again. But we’re stuck trying to feel relieved when we see her determined smile. I’m sure you’ve noticed it by now. We worry about her to an excessive extent.”

Their feelings of responsibility and debt to Shiori had left them overprotective. They never wanted to see her hurt again, and as a result they treated her like something that had to be handled with care. In turn, Shiori sensed this from each of them, and it left her hiding her wounds behind a resolute smile, trying not to worry them. Their mutual consideration for each other had, in the end, drawn a line between them that neither side could ever cross.

It was a twisted relationship built upon kindness.

And perhaps if Alec had been there at the time that it happened, he too would have fallen into the same trap.

“On the surface, the incident is over. However, for us it is not a thing of the past. Ranvald, Akatsuki... They did all of this and yet they could not be convicted by the law. So the incident continues to hang over all of us. There is no closure, no matter what we do. Until Shiori can smile, truly smile, from the bottom of her heart, we will never feel like this is over.”

“Nils...”

“It’s likely that you are the one who’s closest to her at present, Alec. She looks most at ease when she is in your company. So please...take care of her.”

Nils smiled then, his face twisting as if he were about to cry, and left. Alec watched him go, then looked down at Shiori. However complicated their relationship might have become, everyone’s worry and concern for her remained unchanged.

“They’re all thinking of you,” Alec said. “Not a single one of them hates you. Look at how much they all care.”

He put a hand softly to the black hair framing her pale face.

“And if they care for you, you have to take better care of yourself too.”

He touched her scars through her clothes. They were not just scars of the heart. Every time she saw them, she must have remembered the past, even when she didn’t want to. And instead of healing, the scars in her heart only deepened.

“A... Alec...”

Shiori shifted slightly, her voice like a quiet moan. Rurii twitched in response and slid over to her pillow.

“Shiori?”

Alec looked at her face, wondering if she had woken, but found her eyes still shut. Her brow creased as she let out a cry of pain. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes, then traced lines down the side of her face.

“Don’t leave me... Don’t...”

“Shiori.”

She was having a nightmare. Alec gently tapped her on the cheek as she moaned, while Rurii also poked at her body.

“Shiori, wake up.”

He took her hand and lightly shook her shoulder. Her eyelashes fluttered, and then her teary eyes opened. She spent a little time staring at him blankly, still not entirely awake, and then she began to shake with worry and fear.

Shiori suddenly sat up, and Alec rushed to hold her tight, worried that she might hurt herself after having so recently been healed. Her whole body shook. She wrapped her delicate hands around her own trembling body and held her arms. It was as if she were pushing against the scars that still remained.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Shiori...”

“The injury, it’s not that bad, I can...”

“Shiori.”

“I don’t want to be a burden to anyone, so...”

Please don't leave me.

Each word she squeezed out was like a sorrowful cry, and the pain of it was so overwhelming that Alec wrapped her body in a strong hug.

"Nobody is going to abandon you," Alec said. "I promised I would be here for you."

He put a hand to one of Shiori's pale cheeks and made her look at him. Her eyes wavered, still not completely focused. Shiori herself seemed to be wavering somewhere between dreams and reality, still not fully awake.

"Your worth, your value, it is not determined by the scars you carry."

Shiori's wandering gaze locked with his own. He kissed her eyelid and felt her body tremble in his arms. He took her tears on his lips, then kissed down her cheek before finally pressing his own lips gently against her own. He heard a sound from within her rise up but continued to pepper her lips with kisses. Then he traced the edge of her lips with his tongue before silently drawing away. The body in his arms had grown still, and her eyes looked up at him, now awake.

"Feeling a little calmer now?" Alec asked.

She turned away at the question, her face flushed red with shy embarrassment.

"I think I am the opposite of calm..."

The voice and tone both belonged to the Shiori he knew, and hearing her speak flooded Alec with relief. But still he held her tight in his arms, where Shiori, too, relaxed and let herself stay. They realized then that Rurii was trying to find some space to insert itself in the moment, and the two of them burst into laughter. Shiori reached out a hand and made a sphere of water, at which point Rurii bounced and drank it up. Then it reached out with a feeler and gently patted her left hand to comfort her.

"Oh..." she uttered.

"Are you still in pain?"

"Yes..."

"Ellen only just healed you a few moments ago. Nils was here too."

"I'll have to make sure to thank them, then."

Shiori nestled her head into Alec's chest. He put a hand to her lustrous black hair, patting her gently as one might a child. After a time, Shiori spoke.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I caused all this trouble."

Her voice was like a whisper, her words an apology.

"Nobody thinks that," he said. "You couldn't say anything, could you?"

He took his hand from her head and hugged her once more. Shiori nodded.

“Was there something that stopped you from being able to speak?” he asked.

A silence passed between them.

“Did they threaten or intimidate you because of your injuries?”

“Yes...” she said finally. “At first everyone worried about me, but when the injuries grew in number and the healing costs piled up, they blamed me for it instead. They were so harsh... I didn’t want to be a burden to anyone, so I took care of things myself. I only went to a physicker or doctor for injuries that would stop me from working, or were too obvious.”

“But I can’t wrap my head around how you could have sustained these injuries in a party with four vanguards.”

“They told me that it was more effective to focus on offense than it was to protect the rear guard. That was why I was made responsible for protecting Rachel.”

“Rachel?”

“She was Akatsuki’s summoner. Whenever she was chanting, she was wide open, so it was my job to protect her at those times.”

“They had a support-type playing a rear guard role?”

“They said that if I wasn’t going to fight but I still had my hands free, defense was the least I could do.”

“But normally you would never leave a support-type with rear guard responsibilities. No matter how much defense magic they’re capable of. I mean, look at the snow wolves—some monsters will aim for the weakest party members first.”

Alec had to wonder if Shiori was deliberately made a target. Perhaps a shield, even, or at worst...a decoy.

“I know. I know that now. But back then, it was all I could do just to keep up with everyone. All I knew how to do was housekeeping. I was at a disadvantage, so I just...”

Shiori looked down, and her shoulders trembled with a slight laugh.

“Everyone was in such a rush. We’d all become adventurers quite late, and we were a lower rank than other adventurers our age. We tried to rush our rank promotion by taking on difficult requests, but it didn’t go very well...”

“And they blamed you for that?”

“They did. Everyone was strong on their own, but we were a party lacking teamwork. Everyone fought the way they wanted, in their own style, and it made things much harder as the requests got tougher. I think they began to see Rachel and I as getting in the way of things, because we were the ones who needed protection. But even then

Rachel had summoning abilities, which made me the only one holding everyone back. That's why they ordered me to defend her."

It was a common story among parties trying to rush their promotion. It wasn't unheard of for parties to take on requests above their abilities, constantly fail them, and then take their frustration out on their weakest members. But even then, there were many parties who learned to overcome that, and who grew closer as a result.

In Shiori's case, being a foreigner put her at a disadvantage. She had no home to go back to or any relatives for support; she had nowhere to run. It was all too easy for them to use her as an outlet for their frustrations.

"I think Ranvald probably took advantage of the situation. Everyone was in such a rush to improve their rank that they couldn't turn him down. They could rank up by sacrificing an outsider—me. No matter how hard I tried, I was the only party member not getting experience. My share of the reward money was cut too. I never imagined that Ranvald might be at the heart of it... I thought about dropping out—I didn't want to be any more of a burden to the group, but...they told me I was being irresponsible, and Ranvald convinced me to stay on."

Shiori's fingertips clung tight to her own chest.

"Not long after that, we got back from an expedition and I found out my lodging's contract had been dissolved. Everything in my apartment was just gone... Someone had to have done it, but when I asked, nobody knew. And when I talked to the landlord he told me there was nothing more he could do. I was heartbroken... I couldn't believe that I had to start all over again."

Shiori had started her life from zero, in a land that was not her own. She worked and she studied and she struggled without rest for two years. And then, in one fell swoop, in one moment, all of the exhaustion that had built up over all that time—it crushed her.

"I started renting a room in the house that Akatsuki shared. But I couldn't rest; somebody was always standing guard over me. Because I couldn't rest, I couldn't concentrate, and my injuries on expeditions grew because my movements were sluggish. The team was always angry at me, blaming me for it. So I did everything I could to not be more of a burden. I was struggling so much I didn't even have the chance to notice how strange it was that I had to shoulder the party's expenses as a penalty."

Shiori explained that she went through her days like a machine, and she barely had the time or the energy to notice how she was being treated or the behavior of the Akatsuki members. Or perhaps she had simply shut off her own heart without realizing it, in order to save it from breaking entirely.

This sounds all too similar to how human traffickers prepare their slaves...

It was a method of subordination—take away all means of escape, drive the target to their physical and mental limits, and take away their self-respect.

“One day, Rachel saw my scars. She said, ‘You have to be careful because they’ll all despise you; scars on a woman’s body are proof that she is sullied.’ She told me that was why I couldn’t meet with big brother—because he’d noticed, and was avoiding me. She told me that’s why the others were so cold to me. I didn’t believe all of it, but when she told me that if Ranvald found out, I could lose my place in the Guild and be forced to sell myself, I just... I...”

A scarred woman was a sinner in a past life.

There was a time in history where women were despised for just this reason. However, that was hundreds of years ago—a time when the lands were rooted in outdated beliefs, during the rule of the Empire. In today’s world, nobody went around spouting such superstitions, and those that did were very, very long in the tooth.

“I was mentally broken, and I spent most of my time in bed. One day, I awoke to find myself on a horse and cart...”

“Shiori...”

Her head drooped and pushed into his chest. Her fingers trembled as they clung to him. He held her close, and she let out a sigh.

“We’d received a request from an imperial, but there was no need for me to go. All they needed were bodyguards and help carrying the relics out of the labyrinth. We were inside of that labyrinth when I hit my utter limit. I couldn’t move. The party said that if they had to carry me, then that would mean fewer relics they could handle. They said that I’d put them in danger if a monster came out and they had to run... They said I was dirty, an outsider, and that it was fine because there was nobody waiting for me back at the capital. And so...”

Shiori had been a place for them to vent their frustrations, was beaten to her mental limit, and then used as a coin purse until she had nothing left to give...at which point they decided to kill her so she couldn’t speak a word about it. Alec couldn’t believe that the people behind it all were human.

Shiori let out a moan, and Alec stroked her back. He put a hand to her cheek and raised her eyes to his once more.

“I know that wasn’t easy to talk about, Shiori. I know it must have been hard,” he said, wiping away her tears with a finger. “But Zack would never abandon you, not even if he saw your scars. And when you disappeared, everyone was worried; they all went searching for you. None of them hate or despise you Shiori—they think the world of you.”

“I...I know. But I was scared.”

“When a fear buries itself deep in your heart, it is not a simple thing to wipe clean.”

This was especially true of a fear that had arisen from being abandoned and left for dead. It would be a long time before a fear like that, one that had taken root so deep, could ever be purged. That was why Alec wanted to be with her, to watch over her.

“I have never once thought of abandoning you.”

“Alec...”

“I too have memories I want to forget. I too have been hurt so badly that the experiences still haunt my dreams. But when I suffered from one of those dreams and you told me you would be with me always, your words saved me. I decided then that I wanted to be a place where you could belong. Shiori...”

The tip of his thumb traced the shape of her lips.

“Please, lean on me as I did you. I will be a place of comfort for you, whenever you need it. I will be by your side for as long as you want.”

Shiori did not reply with words. Instead, she gave only a small nod. But even with just that gesture, he felt the thin ice walls that encased her heart begin to melt. He felt a heart that was slowly opening.

The fingers touching her lips slid to her cheek. Shiori’s eyes met his own. Her eyes looked so black as they closed...and then he laid his lips upon her own. Her hands wrapped around his back, a slight hesitation in her movement.

Gentle, pecking kisses gave way to something deeper and more intense. The tip of Alec’s tongue searched, opening Shiori’s lips and entering, entwining her tongue in his own. A sensual sigh slipped from the edge of her lips, and he thought of her as so very precious as she fumbled with her own tongue to respond to his feelings. It was in this way that they partook greedily of one another—searching for one another in their embrace, and completely oblivious to the passing of time.

3

Some time had passed since Shiori and Alec had shared of each other as if they might eventually melt into one.

After lying in each other’s arms for a time, they approached the guard at the tent opening. The beds were supposed to be for the injured, and they were hesitant to stay now that Shiori had been healed, but the knight insisted.

“We have enough beds at present. Please, rest until the morning,”

he said. Then he pushed them back into the tent with a grin, assuring them that there would be plenty of work for them the following day.

Shiori woke in the middle of the night, thirsty. She sat up from the simple bed and drank some water from the canteen placed by her pillow. Perhaps it was from Brovito's springs. It was different from water in Japan, smoother and gentler. She put the canteen back when she was done, then turned to Alec, who was sleeping on the bed next to her own, and listened to him breathe.

Getting out of bed, she walked over to him and placed a hand lightly on his chestnut hair. She enjoyed the soft and comforting feel of it running through her fingers, then slid her hand to his cheek. His face was pale with exhaustion, and there were subtle dark marks under his eyes.



Rurii was completely at ease, asleep at Alec's feet. Neither the slime nor Alec showed any signs of waking.

I worried you both so much...

She hadn't been able to tell anyone about the injury to her arm. She feared she would be berated and abandoned. She knew Alec would never do such a thing, and yet even then, she could not bring herself to tell him. With each and every step she took, the fear that clung to her in the depths of her heart reared its ugly head and kept her from speaking out.

All the work she had done in those first two years, struggling and pushing herself beyond the point of breaking, and all of it destroyed in a single day. She'd found the strength to stand again, and apply herself to her work in the days since, but it had required great effort. She had been driven purely by the feeling that she did not want to die a meaningless death.

But if Alec were to turn on her with hatred and contempt, she knew she would not be able to pick herself up again. She realized now that these feelings showed the extent to which she had opened her heart to him.

My second love since coming to this world.

Perhaps her first love was not something that could be described with such a word. It was more of an instinctual attachment—a dependence on the man who protected her as she struggled with strange new circumstances.

But all the same, I think I loved him.

"You come to me whenever you're in trouble," he'd said to her when she'd decided to become an adventurer. He gave words of encouragement when he saw her off, and congratulations whenever she succeeded. And even though she was no longer a child, he always patted her head with a big, warm hand.

Zack... I loved him.

She couldn't have stopped herself from falling for him back then. And yet, because of the "warnings" she'd received from others, she'd put a lid on those feelings, covered them. And then—

"I'm so sorry. So sorry I never noticed..."

It was when her consciousness had returned. His face was wracked with pain as he held her in his arms, and when he'd spoken those words—

"Will you be my little sister?"

—her love had come to an end.

Zack had felt responsible for the incident, and in order to prevent anyone else from trying anything remotely similar, he'd told her he would watch over her as a big brother.

Shiori had not forgotten her feelings of love when they became siblings, but at the same time she had come to see Zack as just that. His kindness was that of a big brother to a little sister. And though she was grateful for his consideration, she felt a hole open in her heart, and she could do nothing to quench the impatience and hunger that sometimes came over her.

It struck when she passed by intimate couples on the street. When she saw parents walking joyfully hand in hand with young children. When she saw elderly lovers who had maintained their tender warmth for each other over many long years.

When she saw this warmth, and when she had the thought that she herself would never have it as a foreigner in a different world, her heart was devoured in flame. Even Zack would at some point find a partner and leave her. Nadia and Clemens, too, would at some time start families of their own. Perhaps they would even return to their hometowns.

But she had left all of that behind in the other world. And now it seemed beyond her reach. More than a few times, she found herself thinking she might go crazy from the feelings of isolation. She was from another world, and she had no home to return to. She had finally found a place where she felt a sense of belonging, but could she live on if the day came when she would have to give it away?

And it was then, as she carried these feelings she could do nothing about, that Alec appeared before her.

"I will be the place where you belong."

He'd spoken these words and he'd taken her hand. He'd been by her side. He'd squeezed her hand in his own, rubbed her head, and wrapped her in his arms. He'd even kissed her warmly.

"Alec..."

She took his cheeks in both of her hands as he slept, and silently kissed his lips. When she took her lips away, she rubbed his cheek with her own. He was kind. He was warm. And he filled her own heart with his warmth.

"I've fallen in love with you, Alec."

She touched her lips to his own once more, over and over. And then...

It was early in the morning. Dawn was still a little ways off, and the sky was dim. The first aid area had been quiet through the evening save for hushed whispers and occasional passing footsteps, but it was now growing lively as people woke. There was the sound of quiet conversation and canvas rustling as people went in and out of tents, and the drifting scent of food, enticing Shiori's empty stomach. It seemed the women of the village had begun preparing food.

Come to think of it, I haven't eaten since breakfast yesterday morning.

Even though her injuries had just been healed, it was impossible not to feel a strong pull to the scent of food after a whole day of only water. Shiori opened her eyes slowly, then nearly screamed when she realized her predicament.

"You're awake, then?"

She was looking right into Alec's face. Her own face went red right down to her neck. Somehow, she'd ended up in his arms, sharing the same bed.

"Oh... Oh?! How... How did this happen...?"

"You're asking me? I woke up in the middle of the night to find you sleeping right next to me. I couldn't have imagined you'd be so inviting in a place like this. You're bolder than I gave you credit for."

"Whaaat?!"

It seemed that while staring at his sleeping face, she'd ended up sleeping right there alongside him.

"I-I wasn't trying to be inviting!" she said, her reply somewhat panicked.

"I'm just joking," Alec said with a mischievous grin.

He sat up, then, and lifted her into his arms.

"How's your body feel? Are you okay?" he asked, putting a hand to her cheek.

"I'm okay."

He was so considerate. Her left arm was healed, and her body felt good.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"It's fine. But please, take care of yourself," he said. His hand on her cheek was soft and warm. "I won't tell you to stay out of trouble. In this line of work, you do what you have to. But stop holding back and hiding your pain. I want you to tell me. It's hard for me, not knowing when you need help."

Alec looked both hurt and sad, and she knew that his worry came from the core of his being.

"Okay..."

"That's a promise, right?"

"Okay... Got it. It's...a promise."

He made her repeat after him, but she wasn't sure it was a promise she could keep. She'd carried on like this for so long. Alec seemed to realize how she felt from her words, and the awkward silence it left between them. He stared at her carefully, then his face opened into a daring grin. His dark magenta eyes sparkled with playfulness. She suddenly found herself wrapped tight in his arms.

"And if you break your promise..."

He pushed his lips into the vulnerable flesh of her neck and,

before she had time to think, sucked it in with a breath. She let out a short cry of surprise and embarrassment, then felt him whisper heatedly into her ear.

“...for each time you break it, I’ll leave one mark on you.”

His voice was low, and wrapped in a sensuality that made her ears quiver and her body tremble. There was no way she could withstand such punishment, and she nodded profusely.

“I-I understand. But...”

“Hm?”

“You didn’t leave a mark this time, did you?”

“And if I did...?”

“Oh dear...”

What would she do if she had a love bite somewhere so conspicuous? What if someone noticed? She put a panicked hand to her neck, and Alec laughed like a schoolboy nailing a practical joke.

Meanwhile, Rurii quivered quietly in place, as if to say, “*What are you two up to so early in the morning?*”

“I’m joking,” Alec said. “No marks this time. But if you break your promise, I won’t hold back.”

“Er...” Shiori nodded meekly. “Very well.”

He wrapped her up once more in a strong hug, at which point they felt movement outside of their tent.

“Alec, Shiori. Are you awake?”

At the sound of the voice from outside, Alec released his hold on her.

“Uh... Yes!”

Shiori used the opportunity to make a frantic getaway, running to the entrance of the tent. She blushed at the sound of him laughing behind her and rolled up the canvas at the tent entrance. A medic was there with a tray of soup and bread rolls.

“I’ve brought breakfast,” he said. “Once you’ve finished your meal Caspar would like to speak with you.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have. Thank you so much.”

Shiori took the tray and the medic smiled kindly. It was the knight who had carried her to the tent the previous day.

“I’m glad to see you looking well,” he said. “You had everybody so worried. It was a bit of a panic around here when we realized that someone so integral to aiding with the snow wolves had suffered such an injury.”

“Someone so integral...? I...I really didn’t do that much...”

Shiori felt the praise was excessive—all she’d done was worry everyone. Her part in the course of events was only small. She’d only been able to support the others. Flustered, she looked down at her feet. The knight smiled again.

“Everyone’s grateful for your help. You were there supporting the doctors and medics, and before that you helped to evacuate the injured and release the captured snow wolves. When people talk of magic they tend to fixate on offensive spells, but your ability to use it so tactfully and efficiently was truly something to behold. I think even the knights could learn much from what you did.”

The knight gave Shiori a pat on the shoulder.

“Please, come and let everyone know you’re all right when you have the chance,” he said. “And Alec too.”

“You should take his compliments for what they are,” said Alec after the knight had left. “You’re too quick to humble yourself, and it’s getting to be a bad habit.”

“I suppose so...”

But she wasn’t trying to humble herself. Rather, it was that she simply lacked confidence. But to see her agreeing so honestly lightened the expression on Alec’s face, and he smiled warmly.

“Shall we eat?” he asked. “Best get to it while it’s still warm.”

“Yes, good idea.”

Shiori handed him a soup bowl and bread roll. She offered to share half of her own meal with Rurii, but the slime still seemed full from the previous day’s battle, and declined. It began bouncing around, changing its own shape to entertain itself.

“Guess I’ve got a full meal to myself, today.”

Rurii wobbled a response: “*Please help yourself!*”

Shiori took her own bowl in hand and felt its warmth through her fingers, then sipped at the milky-white soup, flavored with salt and spices. As she continued to sip from it, potatoes and onions revealed themselves at the bottom of the bowl. Both were varieties cultivated on Torisval lands, though she suspected the abundant milk and butter was local Brovito produce—the village had a thriving dairy industry.

“It’s delicious...” Shiori said.

“That it is.”

The warmth of the soup permeated her body, and she let out a satisfied sigh at the same time as Alec. They looked at each other in surprise and laughed, then went back to enjoying their breakfast.

It was a quiet, relaxing time before daybreak, and it marked the beginning of another day.

4

“I see. Given the facts, I can see how it would have been difficult to prosecute.”

When he’d heard the whole story, Caspar’s face scrunched in dissatisfaction. He stopped writing for a moment and massaged his

brow. Then he looked at his report and let out a deep sigh.

“Even putting aside the fact that it happened within the Guild, psychological abuse is especially difficult to prove. Shiori herself admitted that her physical injuries all came from magical beasts. The suspects all deny it, and there are no witnesses. That leaves only circumstantial evidence, and, well...”

Alec couldn't hide his disappointment. He could barely stand to be there as Shiori smiled ruefully and shrugged off the whole incident as though it were merely unfortunate.

“I will send an official report to the Tris headquarters all the same,” said Caspar. “Shall I make a second copy of the report? The Guild needs a record also, no? I can't include everything, but I can retain all the information that may prove helpful as a reference.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“I'll make sure it gets to you before year's end. Shall I send it to the Guild's address?”

“Address it to Zack Ciel, please,” said Alec. “I'll make sure he's informed.”

“Understood. And you have my apologies, Miss Shiori. I made you bring up all those horrible memories, and yet in the end I could not be of service.”

Shiori's eyebrows drooped. She let a slight smile cross her features, but it appeared troubled.

“It's fine,” she said. “I should apologize too, for causing you such trouble during such a trying time.”

Shiori and Alec stood from their chairs. The interview had come to a close. Caspar stood as well to see them off.

“What will you do now?” he asked them.

“We'll stay here a little longer. That is, as long as there are still ways for us to help.”

Caspar let out a relieved sigh and chuckled. They were still so low on manpower. At the very least, the knights would need help until such a time as the guilty merchants and the injured could be sent to the capital. Then they had to consider the travelers, who could not be allowed to leave on their own until it was certain the snow wolves were no longer a threat. If the travelers were to be moved in larger groups, they would need protection.

“We'd be glad for your help. Same as yesterday: Alec, you'll be on security duty, and Shiori, you'll be helping with first aid. They'll be able to give you more detailed instructions when you arrive.”

“Got it.”

“Sorry to trouble you,” Caspar added.

“Not at all. This is why the Adventurers' Guild exists.”

“Please,” added Shiori, “don't let it worry you.”

Usually Caspar was the one doing the worrying, so now that the adventurers were worried about him, he could only chuckle at how the tables had turned. He saw the two adventurers and their slime out of the tent, then heaved a sigh and fell back in his chair.

“Abuse of immigrant women, huh...”

It was truly unfortunate that it wasn't a rarer occurrence. Including the neighboring countries, there was no shortage of immigrants and refugees, and it was all too common for them to get trapped in this web. That was why periodic inspections were made at brothels, the pleasure district, and restaurants and bars. Every time, businesses dabbling in illegal practices were exposed. Thanks to the current king, the inspection rate had increased and the crime rate had dropped, but the reality was that the problem could not be completely eradicated. It was horrible to think about, but as long as there was demand, there would also be supply.

Some three or four years ago, a high-class brothel in the capital was exposed for coercing immigrant women into prostitution. Due to the cruelty of the situation, very little was revealed to the public outside of the straight facts, but it had been a ghastly, horrid affair.

On the face of it, the business was a members-only gentlemen's club where upper class men could find high-class prostitutes who'd been educated like noblewomen. However, behind the scenes they kidnapped immigrant women who lacked knowledge of the local language and customs. These women were then mentally and physically abused to ensure obedience and prevent escape attempts. Then, they were put to work.

Their bodies were scarred and branded, and they were intimidated with old superstitions that said a scarred woman was considered an outcast in society.

One of these women was made to spend time with a sadist, and received gruesome scars that were difficult to look at. And that was far from the end of it. Though accurate numbers could not be determined, there was good reason to believe that some of these prostitutes had in fact died at the hands of patrons who were too “playful.” The bodies that *were* recovered were in such horrifying states that more than a few knights suffered psychological trauma from viewing them.

Caspar was in the capital's knight corps at the time, and took part in the investigation.

“Don't look at my body!”

“Please, you can't let him know!”

Even now, long after the incident, he could still hear the frenzied cries of those women as they were taken into medical care by the knight brigade. Many of them were able to return to a regular life, but

even now some still remained in facilities where they were taken care of due to the deep, deep scars on their psyches.

That was why, when Caspar had been called to Shiori's tent because she had been injured by the merchants and was refusing treatment, he once again saw visions of those same panicking women of the past.

Shiori's reaction, and her scars, were so reminiscent of them that Caspar had overreacted. He'd been enraged, and demanded to speak to the man she was traveling with, believing he might have had a hand in the injuries. But all too soon he realized that the man had no connection to the crimes at all.

The man, Alec, had been hurt terribly at the mere sight of Shiori's scars. His face went pale, and he ran trembling fingers along her arm gently, as though she might shatter at his very touch. Alec's face in that moment, warped with pain, made him look as if he, too, bore her injuries.

It was the face of a man who cared for a woman.

Caspar felt that Alec and Shiori cared deeply for one another. With Alec by her side, he was sure that a day would come when Shiori's deep wounds were completely healed. He prayed for such a day.

Speaking of which...

The brothel incident in the capital was never solved because they were unable to determine the mastermind behind it all.

It was known that among the brothel's clientele, there was a highly ranked government official and a VIP from an allied country. Hence, this required decisions of a political nature to be made, and so Torisval's own margrave took the reins to make the arrest. However, although the brothel's manager was arrested, the ringleader and owner was never found, and thus escaped arrest and punishment.

Several months passed in which the case remained unsolved, and then Caspar was dispatched to a garrison on the outskirts, where till this day the results of that case remained unknown to him.

"Sir Caspar! The village elder is calling for you. Said there's something he'd like to speak with you about."

"Understood. I'll see him immediately."

Caspar hurriedly finished his report and placed it in his chest pocket, then stood from his chair. He headed outside where the morning was abuzz with movement.

Perhaps, when I have a little time, I should visit the capital. I might be able to learn something.

He thought of this as he rolled up the entrance to his tent, where he squinted at the light of the morning sun. What Caspar did not know was that there was in fact a very close-knit connection between the

incident in the capital, and the deep scars that Shiori still wore on her heart.

Interlude: Shiori's Lost Diary

■ ? Month, ? Day

I received a pen and textbook from Zack today, for studying the language here. I have plenty of notebooks, so I'm going to use one as a diary. The textbook is definitely a hand-me-down, and it's seen better days. I really want to learn the language so I can read some books. I want to be able to have a conversation.

Even though my fever is down, I'm still not allowed out of bed. This is the first time in my life I've been stuck in bed for so long. I know I was tired because of all that overtime, but I think I was mentally exhausted too. Still, I never imagined I'd end up in another world... I still don't believe it, but I think I'm going to have to accept it. How else do I explain the magic and the monsters that I've seen? I was so surprised to see that person's terrible injury healed in an instant.

No. Right now, it's not about believing or not believing. I have to think about how I'm going to live and make a living here.

Because I just don't think...that there's any way to get home.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 8

I started studying today. I practiced writing names. Mine, Zack's, Nadia's, and Nils's. The letters of this language are reminiscent of the English alphabet. I really want to remember it all quickly, but I've got a long way to go...

Calendar: They have something similar to the calendars I'm used to. The number of months and days are pretty much the same, but there are a few differences.

Number of Days: It seems it's been eight days since I arrived in this world.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 11

I was studying when a man named Ranvald(?) came to visit. He's graying but handsome, and probably someone important. He asked me some questions but I couldn't understand what he said. All he could do was chuckle.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 12

I was finally allowed out of bed. They gave me some clothes and

shoes. They feel a bit too young for me, but I guess it's better that I don't wear my old clothes here. They'd only make me stand out. It looks like I don't have my work bag here either. What a pain...

The Building: On the first floor there's the lobby, an office, a dining room, and a shop. There's a bulletin board in the lobby, which also seems to act as a reception desk. Maybe they help people find jobs here? On the second floor there's an infirmary and a break room, I think? The third floor is full of lots of smaller rooms.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 14

I met the most astonishingly handsome man. He was really sexy, and he has this baritone voice that made me shiver. He appears to be a friend of Zack and Nadia. Cleymens? He introduced himself, but I was so nervous I didn't catch exactly what he said. He's so beautiful I can't look directly at him. I feel like I'll go blind if I do.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 15

I studied all morning. I really want to remember the language.

Zack and Nadia were arguing about something. But it didn't seem like an outright quarrel. At least, I didn't feel any malice between them... Cleymens played the mediator. I wonder what it was about?

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 16

Starting today I'm staying at Nadia's house. She was all smiles, but Zack looked troubled. I wonder if this was what they were arguing about yesterday?

Perhaps it looked bad for Zack. It probably can't be helped, but I'm still a bit sad.

Constellations: I don't recognize a single one.

The Moon: It's the same as back home. Perhaps it's a parallel world?

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 20

I'm finally allowed to do a little work. Just cleaning the hall. One morning of work earned me one large copper coin. I have no idea what it's worth. I'll ask later.

I studied all afternoon. Lots of different people are coming to teach me. Cleymens's voice is far too mesmerizing. I can't concentrate when he's talking. Ranvald is easy to understand. He's like a schoolteacher.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 30

I'm adjusting to life in this world. I'm glad it's basically the same as what I'm used to. It's like civilization from the past. Fifteenth-

century Europe or thereabouts? There are lots of food ingredients I've never seen before, but the food is still good. The vegetables are similar to what I'm familiar with, but with slight differences. Apparently some magical beasts are used in select dishes. I am very curious about that.

Country: Storydia. Or maybe Shtorydia. I couldn't quite catch it.

City: Tooris? Teeris?

Clemens: Not Cleymens.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 37

I was interrogated by a knight (I think?) in the office. He spoke very sternly and asked me a bunch of questions but I couldn't understand what he said. I'm starting to get better at understanding short sentences. In the middle of it all, I thought he was going to take me away. He pinned my arms and tied me up, and I really thought I was in for it. When I think about it though, I *am* an illegal immigrant. I honestly don't know what would have happened if Zack hadn't come...

I was so scared I had to hold back tears. Zack patted me on the head. He's been doing that sometimes, and I can't help feeling like he's treating me like a child.

Constellations: I discovered the North Star, the Cassiopeia constellation, and the Big Dipper. I've decided that this must be a parallel Earth.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 45

Nadia let me use her kitchen. Apparently she rarely does any cooking. She has a stove top and a refrigerator so I thought it was worth a try. Magical appliances? I think that's what they're called. Fortunately, they work pretty much the same as they do back home.

Nadia was over the moon about the simple soup that I made. It made me happy, like I was able to pay her back a little for all her help. We've been eating out this whole time and Nadia always pays. I feel awful about it. I'll make sure she lets me prepare a meal tomorrow too.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 49

Zack bought me some clothes, and just like last time, the style is too young for me. I'd heard that Japanese people look younger than people think, but just how old does he think I am, I wonder? He's always patting my head too—does he think I'm a child? I mean, it's true I'm not very tall.

Nadia seemed to understand what I was thinking, and she got mad at Zack. Women tend to look at things like skin and complexion differently, and I think she's treating me my age. I mean, when we

went to buy underwear she took me to the adults' section.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 67

I can speak in simple words now. I'm also capable of working my way through children's books. It feels so good to be able to communicate, even if complex discussions are still a long way off.

Today I was officially hired as a member of this facility. I work in the cafeteria. It looks like when I get more used to things they'll even let me help with the cooking.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 72

Now that I can talk a little I'm being asked lots of different things. Everyone was shocked when they finally heard my real age. Nadia glared at Zack and said, "I told you, didn't I?" Zack seemed to think I was around fifteen or sixteen. He'd looked at my chest to decide. Can you believe it?! How horrible, deciding a woman's age based on her bust size! Yes, I may be on the small side! But this is perfectly normal in Japan!

Facility: Adventurers' Guild? A job agency?

Adventurer: They exterminate monsters, go on expeditions, provide protection, gather materials, and even act as tour guides. A kind of do-it-all, handyman service?

Organization: The main branch is in the capital? Each area has a branch. This is the Tris branch (Tris is the name of the city).

Representative: The guild master is Ranvald.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 108

Foreigners' faces all look the same to me, so I have trouble telling people apart. I remember everyone I'm familiar with, but I have trouble putting names to faces for everyone else. It's something of a bother. It might take a while to get used to this.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 119

Nadia doesn't really like the poor condition her skin is in. She says it makes her look older. I think it's probably because she smokes a lot and her diet consists mainly of meat...probably, anyway. I rarely ever see her eat vegetables. I should think up some meals for her. And also see if I can get her to cut down a little on the cigarettes. She *does* look quite cool when she's smoking, but health should always come first.

Adventurer Rank: In ascending order: E, D, C, B, A, S. Zack is the highest rank, S. Nadia and Clemens are A. Wow.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 182

The knights came to ask me questions again. Zack was with me. It

seems that he has some sway over the knights, and they were more polite this time. But there were still a lot of questions I simply couldn't answer. *Where did you come from? How did you collapse in the forest?* Even I don't know the answers. I just woke up and found myself in the infirmary. I couldn't catch everything that was discussed. Zack negotiated with the knights, and they agreed not to send me to the dungeons if Zack would be my legal guarantor.

I am beyond grateful.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 194

Some of the women at the Guild surrounded me and gave me a warning. They said I was relying too much on Zack and the others. I know what they were trying to say. It's been worrying me too. I've saved up some money, so perhaps it's time I looked for a cheap apartment. I'd like a new job too. I won't be able to rid myself of this worry until I've saved up more money. I hope I can find a place that will hire me.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 200

Still struggling to find work. It seems being Eastern is getting in the way. Not to mention the fact that I still have some issues with the language. Scouts for brothels often approach me, though. "It's an easy way to make money, just chatting with distinguished gentlemen," they say. But no matter how you look at it, it's the sex industry. I can't stand the way they stare at me and grin. I won't do it.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 203

A refined man who appeared to be a nobleman talked to me today. It was about customer service work for a high-class members-only gentlemen's club. Hm... What to do? It's a job working directly with men, so...I think I should ask someone about it.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 204

Zack demanded that I not take the job. What a shock. Apparently there's something suspicious about the club. So glad I thought to ask for advice.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 210

I've tried so hard to look for work but it's really difficult. The language barrier is still there, and people are on guard because of my appearance. I decided to register with the Adventurers' Guild. Zack and the others said they'd help me out. On the bright side, I found a place to live. I'll be moving in soon.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 219

I made it through the Adventurer's Registration Exam. I was so nervous. Not only was there a written portion, there was also an interview. But I'm so happy I passed! That said, my results for the aptitude test weren't great. I have a little magical energy, but it's really only a little. It seems like I won't get much better than I am now, so working as a mage will be pretty hard, apparently. At the same time, it's not like I can be a swordsman or any other class... I wonder if there's some other way I can support a team...

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 223

I thought about it long and hard, and decided to register as a mage for the time being. I really don't have the luxury of time. I need to work so I can save money. Big sister Nadia (she told me to call her big sister) said she'd act as my tutor and teach me about magic.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 224

Big sister Nadia bought me some equipment to celebrate my registration. I have to find some way to repay her. Still, a wizard's hat? A bit too on the nose, no? Then again, it is wide-brimmed, which makes it perfect for blocking the sun. And there's no sunscreen here... I miss Japan's quality cosmetics...

In other news, it looks like I'm just not suited to being an attack-type mage. I run out of magic trying to handle even one small magical beast. That doesn't even happen to new apprentices. But even if it's not attack magic, surely there's *some* way I can use my magic to do jobs?

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 248

I've gotten quite used to the adventurer's life. I've only been on one expedition so far, though. For the most part I spend my days doing simple gathering quests in safe places. Stuff like picking medicinal herbs. It's boring and the rewards aren't great, so most adventurers don't pick up these requests, but at least it means I don't have trouble finding jobs. I have some mixed feelings about it. Still, good things have come of it too—at first people eyed me suspiciously about the work, but now sometimes people request me specifically! It's so important to keep working at things. Slow and steady wins the race.

Zack patted me on the head again. I'm very used to him treating me like a kid.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 280

Ranvald taught me illusion magic. It's a type of magic that gives

your imagined images real shape. When I got home, I tried creating an image of Japan. I want to go home. I wonder how everyone is. Are they looking for me...?

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 288

People have been inviting me to fill temporary vacancies in their parties. Every day is busy. I can't take part in battle, but it seems like everyone likes me doing the cooking instead. Nobody wants to cook when they're exhausted and worn out. On top of that, with magic you never run out of water, and making a fire is easy. It's great. So convenient! I'm currently experimenting with a way to use magic to do the laundry.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 336

We got so dirty during an expedition. There happened to be a rocky area nearby, so I used my magic to carve some of it away and fill it with warm water. Everyone was overjoyed. The water was kind of tepid, but everyone said it was fine. I think I'm going to experiment with bath magic. That means I should probably prepare a bath set too.

I'm pretty good at laundry magic now, but I think there's still room for improvement. I'm so happy when people like these spells.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 350

I'm looking at ways to make baths in places that don't have rocks. Everyone's looking forward to it. Especially the women. They say it's especially difficult when *that* time of month comes around on an expedition. I can really sympathize...

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 404

At the party campsite I do the cooking, laundry, and make baths. These are all established roles now. One of the people I worked with said, "You're just like a housekeeper."

A housekeeper...

How about "housekeeping mage"?

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 439

Today I ranked up. I'm D-rank now. It makes me happy to think my slow and steady approach to doing my best paid off. Zack and the others all celebrated my promotion. "You did great," he said, patting my head again. I felt like they were all a bit uncertain and on edge when we first met, but now they're always really kind.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 446

I'm being invited to parties as a temporary member much more

than before. It seems like work and expeditions are a little more comfortable when I'm on a team. Warm food and a bath really do make a big difference. Everyone seems happy with the laundry magic as well. I almost feel guilty for how happy they all are for something so simple. It makes me really happy too. I'll keep doing my best.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 450

My cooking repertoire has really grown. Everyone is very happy with the local Storydian cuisine. I'll have to learn more of it. I'm also doing some experiments—trying to make beds with magic. I may have to make the soil more dry. Perhaps I should sterilize it.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 467

I discovered a store for imported goods! There were even some spices from the eastern region. It was expensive but I splurged on a big bottle of soy sauce. Now I can eat Japanese food!

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 475

I went to sleep with my hair wet and caught a cold. I wonder if I can use magic to create something similar to a hair dryer? It's something I'm going to experiment with.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 476

Wind magic is really cold! In summer it's fine, but it'll be rough in the cooler seasons. I wonder if I can use fire magic to raise the temperature a little.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 482

Getting the balance right for the hair dryer magic is a real struggle. That said, I can kind of make it work. I have to keep practicing until I can create a warm, stable breeze.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 488

Karaage and shogayaki are both really popular. Everyone loves meat dishes. I finally succeeded with my magical hair dryer. Might even be able to use it as a kind of air conditioner. I just have to be careful I don't run out of magic.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 509

People were shocked by my hair dryer. Apparently combining magic is difficult and most people can't even do it. Still, there *are* some who can. I think it's probably because my magical power is so low... My spells are weak which makes it easier to make fine adjustments...

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 538

Every day is busy and so fulfilling. But when I have free days like today, I end up thinking about a lot of things. What am I going to do about my future? How long can I keep working? I sometimes feel myself filled with a vague uncertainty. That's why days off are scary. When I'm working, I don't have time for these stray thoughts.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 642

I was so shocked when Zack got drunk and hugged me. "You're so cute!" he said, rubbing my head. Apparently I'm just the right height for inviting his head rubbing. He still treats me like a kid!

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 644

I got another warning. I was told to stop getting unnecessarily close to men because it's indecent. They said it was for the sake of the Guild's name. I never, ever intended to do such a thing... I see male and female adventurers together all the time, but perhaps there's some standard I'm not seeing.

Until recently, this country allowed for polygamy, and as a result men have a tendency to look at relationships a little more loosely. That's why women have to keep their distance. I guess in some ways this world is still very old fashioned, so I should keep my guard up. Recently, I've gotten a lot of warnings like this. It must be very obvious that I'm getting too close to them. I have to be careful. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 754

I was invited to join a party. They're called Akatsuki. They registered as adventurers a little after I did, and we're all about the same age. They want one more person for their rear guard. I'm not sure what to do. They seem friendly, and when I asked around, everyone said they're good people. I want to think about it for a while.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 759

I decided to join Akatsuki. They were so enthusiastic about inviting me, and I think I'll get along with Rachel. Zack seems to think it's a good idea too. I'll have companions. I'm so happy. I'll give it my best!

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 787

Rachel and I seem to be on the same wavelength, so there's lots for us to talk about. We're planning to go to a shop that sells delicious

cakes together. If it's nice, I'll make sure to invite Nadia out some time.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 791

I think my companion Torre might have asked me out? Professed his love? I'm not sure.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 793

Work with my companions is going well. We're doing suppression requests. Everyone likes my meals and baths. I'm really glad. Still, there's so few ways for me to contribute to the team, so I have to increase the amount of responsibilities I can handle.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 812

We took on a request with a high difficulty rating and got through it, but the results weren't great. We might have bitten off more than we can chew at the moment. I think we need to work more as a team... Rachel agrees with me. From the rear guard, you can really see that we're not moving in sync with one another.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 815

Torre has been telling people that I'm his lover. Even though I turned him down. I'm not sure what to make of his flippant attitude. I keep correcting people whenever I hear about it, but it's annoying that some people don't believe me.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 821

We failed another request. This is the third time. I really think we should stop rushing it. We need to choose requests better suited to our party. We're also taking on too many requests in general. Everyone's exhausted.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 824

Rachel and I were told we're not doing enough. We cheered each other up and we'll both try harder.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 825

I got hurt and Rachel got mad at me. She said that if I can't fight, the very least I can do is protect myself. She's exactly right. I don't have any offensive tools like Rachel, so I really have to learn some defense magic.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 839

I didn't get as much experience as I expected. My assessment level

was low too. After discussing it, my reward share was decreased. I guess there was no other choice. I just have to work harder.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 846

Torre came to comfort me. He's kind to me when it's just the two of us, but whenever we're with the others he stares at me in silence. I don't know what to make of it... I don't think he's a bad person, but...

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 852

I have my hands completely full preparing for expeditions and trying to make sure I get enough sleep. I really want to talk to Zack and the others about everything that's going on, but I'm so busy I just don't have time. I haven't seen any of them in about a month. I miss them. I keep getting injured. The party decided they're not going to use party expenses to pay for my medical fees anymore. I guess I'm just not pulling my weight.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 866

I got badly hurt protecting Rachel. The party told me not to do anything stupid. They said I'm already a burden. It's really tough going... Perhaps I'm just not suited to fighting in a team. I'm thinking about quitting.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 871

Everyone except for me was promoted to C-rank. I have to keep working hard or else I'll slow everyone down again. Recently, my experience points have been almost nothing at all. And my loot share was reduced again. The party has told me I can't quit yet. They said it's irresponsible. But what am I supposed to do?

Maybe I'm not working hard enough.

■ ○ Month, □ Day - Days in another world: 879

I'm getting injured so much. I get my wounds healed if they're somewhere obvious, but if I get hurt somewhere people can't see, I take care of it myself. It's hard to deal with everyone getting so mad at me. I have all these scars from my injuries.

Nobody will let me leave the party. They say that if I give up, there's no other work for immigrants. They say I just need to work harder. I guess I just have to keep trying...but to be honest, it's getting to be a bit too much for me to bear.

■ ○ Month, □ Day

There was some kind of mistake and the contract for my lodgings was suddenly canceled. All of my things are just...gone. The landlord

said there was absolutely nothing they could do about it. Apparently the contract cancellation went through all the proper channels. But how...? Fortunately, the party has let me stay in the house they share.

I really want to talk to someone about this, and soon, but Zack and the others are away and busy with scheduled expeditions.

■ Month, Day

I'm always with Akatsuki. I can't relax. Someone is always telling me off for something. I want to move out as soon as I can, but I can't save money.

■ Month, Day

Rachel saw my scars. She said the reason I haven't seen Zack is because of them. She said that in this country, scarred women are the subject of discrimination. But that's so old fashioned... Still, even if I *have* been busy, it is weird that I haven't seen Zack or anyone else in months. Rachel thinks he and the others have been avoiding me. Maybe that's why Ivar and my other companions have been so cold to me recently. I don't want to believe it, but...

■ Month, Day

Ranvald found out about my scars. He said that someone so deplorable can't be allowed in the Guild, but the party begged him and he allowed me to stay. They said if I quit the Guild, then my only other choice is to sell my body. If that happens, I'll never see Zack and everyone else again.

■ Month, Day

Days have gone by where I'm too ill to even leave my room. I've spent all my remaining savings on medicine. I wish I could see Zack.

■ Month, Day

I wish I could see Zack. I wish he was here. I want him to hold me tight and rub my head...



"Hm? What is *this*?"

The man was checking out the condition of a knapsack in a used clothing store, but paused when he noticed the notebook in one of its pockets. He looked through its pages, hoping he might find some useful information, but the strange script only left him puzzled.

"What is this? A foreign language? I can't make head or tail of it."

"Oh...I thought I'd cleaned the bag out. Guess I missed

something.”

The shopkeeper looked at the book in the man’s hands with some curiosity, but he, too, was left perplexed. The knapsack had been brought to him by a man who looked like an adventurer. The man had said he’d wanted to get rid of the belongings of a companion who’d passed away. It was well-used but in good condition, so the shopkeeper had bought it along with its contents. Still, he’d never imagined it would contain a notebook with such clear traces of the bag’s former owner.

“So this knapsack—it used to belong to an immigrant?”

“Yeah...they sold it to help with travel costs when they decided to go back home. If you don’t need the book, I’ll get rid of it for you.”

The shopkeeper knew it would be a harder sell if he revealed that the former owner of the bag was dead. So he made up a story, took the notebook and flipped through it, and when he didn’t find anything worthwhile between its pages, he threw it into the fireplace.

The edges of the book began to flicker in the fire, and then in an instant the whole thing went up in flames. The book burned to black, then crumpled into ashes—disappearing together with the sad story of the girl who had owned it.

Part 2: To New Days

Chapter 1: The Forest's Retribution

1

The first aid area was a hive of commotion in the morning, but thankfully, many of the tents could be taken down after the light injuries had been seen to. Still, many were critically injured, and their tents could not be disassembled so quickly. At a glance, Shiori could see there were more knights and adventurers than before—probably support that had arrived during the night.

The garrison doctor, Tris's medical corps, and Nils and Ellen were discussing something in the main part of the first aid area. Nils and Ellen noticed Shiori, and their momentary surprise at the sight of her soon gave way to smiles. They finished up their discussion and ran over to her.

"Morning!" said Nils. "Glad to see you looking a little brighter. Feeling okay?"

"I'm glad too," added Ellen, "but don't tell me you're already thinking about jumping back into work?!"

Nils wore an easy smile, but Ellen now had her no-nonsense doctor's face on. It was a touch frightening, especially because she'd seen straight through to Shiori's intent. Shiori looked down at her feet apologetically. Alec, standing next to her, let out a laugh, but it was cut short under the weight of Ellen's glare.

"You really should rest for at least one more day," said Ellen. "Physicking puts a bigger strain on the body than people think."

Still, Shiori couldn't stand the idea of doing nothing now that she'd been healed. When he was told off for not making Shiori rest longer, Alec could only chuckle. He gave Shiori a pat on the shoulder and told Ellen not to worry.

"Look, I know Shiori works too hard," he said. "But we only make it harder for her if we worry about her too much. It's better to let her make her own choices. And yeah, she certainly gave us all a scare, but I want to put a little more trust in her."

"Alec..."

Ellen didn't look particularly convinced, but Alec's feelings had reached her heart.

I really do love that about him, thought Shiori.

Alec wasn't going to be overprotective. He was intent on valuing her opinion. He looked her in the eyes and considered what was in her

heart. It wasn't just about protection—it was about bringing their hearts closer together. Even though she'd caused him so much worry, he still trusted her. She decided then that she needed to change, so as not to betray his trust. She knew it wouldn't happen immediately, but still, she would give it her very best.

“And besides,” added Alec, “she made a *promise* that she wouldn't work too hard.”

He placed a hand gently on the back of her neck, emphasizing the word “promise” slightly. Shiori stifled a yelp. Ellen frowned, but ultimately sighed and shook her head, aware that pushing the point was useless.

“I mean it, though. Don't push yourself too hard,” said Ellen. “If you get tired, be sure to take a break.”

“Okay.”

Alec looked down at Shiori with a gentle grin and patted her on the back. When he turned his gaze back to Nils and Ellen, however, he was serious. The lightness in the air had vanished—it was time to talk work.

“What's the situation?”

“As you can see, it's far from optimal,” said Nils, rubbing his brow with a sigh. He looked exhausted, and had probably worked throughout the night. “We have far too many critically injured. It's truly a miracle that nobody died.”

One hundred and seventy-three people had been injured in the snow wolf attack. Close to forty percent of those people bore critical injuries, and most had lacerations that resulted in heavy blood loss. It would be some time before any of these patients were fully recovered. Blood loss left the body exhausted, meaning physicking had to be done over several visits. At present, they'd been able to stop the bleeding for all the injured. Still, it would be some time before any of them could be transported to a proper medical facility in the capital.

“The village clinic is completely full. The rest are in tents, but given the season, the days are cold and the nights are freezing. We're making do with hot stones, braziers, and fire magic stones, but it's far from sufficient.”

“At some point we hope to move people into the inns,” added Ellen, “but it's going to take some time before all the tourists and travelers are cleared out. We can't just kick them out for the sake of the patients.”

Travelers weren't allowed to leave while the threat of the snow wolves still remained. That was why bodyguards were a necessity. But because staff and volunteers were lacking all around, this too was not as easy as it seemed.

“Outside of the inns, there just aren't any buildings the right size

for all of the critically injured,” said Ellen. “And we’re not about to move them into the barns just because they happen to be the right size. We have to be mindful of hygiene.”

“I see,” said Alec.

“Hm... Perhaps I can use my air-conditioning magic to help warm the tents.”

Shiori’s suggestion caught Nils and Ellen off guard. They shared a glance—clearly neither had considered the option.

“I apologize for asking after you’ve only just gotten back to your feet, Shiori, but would you mind? Make sure to take lots of breaks, and only work in short bursts. The medics in the center of the camp will be able to tell you where to start.”

“Okay, got it.”

Ellen then forced a handful of magical energy recovery potions into Shiori’s hands. Apparently they’d brought a surplus of them with the aid supplies. When she looked at Nils’s face, Shiori couldn’t help but wonder if the capital’s medicine stores had made a tidy profit.

“Rurii, you keep an eye on Shiori, okay?” said Alec. “There’s a punishment waiting for her if she breaks her promise. Feel free to bring her to me if she does.”

Rurii wobbled in response to Alec’s joke. Shiori smiled at how well they were getting along, and then she left for the first aid tents.

“I can’t put my finger on it exactly,” Ellen said, her voice dripping with hidden meaning as she watched Shiori leave, “but you two sure are getting along well. Did something happen?”

“Yeah,” added Nils. “For someone who said he’s ‘working on it,’ the two of you seem *very* close.”

“I guess so,” said Alec, chuckling at Nils and Ellen’s overflowing curiosity. He watched Shiori as she discussed something with a medic. “I feel like I grew a little nearer to her heart, is all.”

However, Alec still felt Shiori was hiding something from him—something of great importance. Whenever the topic turned to her hometown, her words grew suddenly heavy. It was like she subtly avoided the topic. He wondered if it was because she didn’t want to talk about it. Maybe there was some reason that she couldn’t. He didn’t know.

But perhaps in time, she’ll share that with me.

It was yet another wall in the depths of Shiori’s heart. But if he could get closer to her than he was now—if he could break down that wall—then perhaps she would open up to him. He wanted to know more about her. The hidden layers of her heart, the expressions she still hadn’t shared with him—anything and everything.

Yes, he wanted to know all of her.

I wonder if it is too much for me to want it all.

To desire everything—the body and the soul—of the woman he loved.

2

By combining fire magic and wind magic, Shiori could create a heater with her air-conditioning spell. She used the same combination of magic as a hair dryer too, and it was practically second nature to her now—casting it cost little effort. She could go easily from tent to tent, quietly warming the air and avoiding pointed stares and curious glances. However, she still couldn't avoid the slight surprise that those with knowledge of magic displayed when they saw her abilities.

“Oh, this is nice. Now we don't have to worry about the patients getting cold.”

A young medic smiled as Shiori warmed the tent for the four patients sharing the same cramped space. The people in the tent, too, relaxed in their beds as the spell took effect.

Though most villagers preferred to warm themselves with hot stones in their blankets, it simply wasn't enough in the winter, when the air outside would drop below freezing. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough equipment to go around, and even after scrounging up everything that was available, sharing it between all twenty tents was impossible. With this in mind, Shiori's air-conditioning magic could make everyone happy.

“How long does the spell last?”

“Perhaps three hours at most. It's impossible to stop the air outside from entering the tents with people coming and going constantly. When a location is surrounded by barrier stakes, it can last around five hours.”

“I see. Let me discuss that with my superiors. The village probably has a reserve for emergencies, and I'm sure the garrison must have a stock of them too.”

“Good idea. I'll come back around later to cast the spell again, but the barrier stakes would be a real help.”

Having to cast the spell across a total of twenty tents every three hours would most certainly tire Shiori out. If that happened, there was a “punishment mark” waiting for her. Even just remembering the sensation of Alec's lips on her neck sent a shiver through Shiori's body.

Though it does seem like he's quite used to that sort of thing...

Alec was a good-looking man, and it was a certainty that he'd had his share of past lovers. Still, Shiori didn't like thinking about it, and she had to laugh at herself when she realized she was getting jealous

about women she'd never know.

After talking a little more with the medic, Shiori left the tent. She'd visited about half of the tents, now. She took a breath, then went on to those that remained.

"Oh my... That was quite tiring..."

Casting twenty spells so soon after being healed had put a strain on Shiori's body, after all. Rurii had wobbled multiple warnings, but Shiori had shrugged them all off, saying, "Just a little longer." By the time they circled around to the last tent, Rurii had completely run out of patience. The slime poked at her neck, forcing her to finish up quickly and head out the tent.

"Okay, *okay*. I'll rest now, I promise."

The angry slime wobbled as it reached out with a feeler and pushed her in the back without pause. The slime directed her to a spot a little ways from the tents, which had been set up as a rest area for adventurers. Some of them were already resting as she arrived, and waved when they saw her approach.

"Well, well, if it isn't Shiori, then. Heard you got injured. Feeling better?"

The easygoing, lackadaisical voice was one Shiori recognized immediately, and she turned around to find Linus. He looked a little ragged and had his hands full with two leather bags, which he dropped at his feet. Shiori wondered if he'd been splitting up the first aid supplies.

"Much better, thank you," she said. "Ellen worked her healing magic."

"Still, you look a little pale. Not pushing yourself, are you?"

"I'm just a little low on magic, is all..."

"So that's a 'yes,' then?"

"Er..."

Rurii trembled in agreement with Linus, while Shiori remained silent and unable to respond.

Even after Alec told me not to push myself...

It struck her then that habits were not things that you could easily rid yourself of. Even when she was tired, she still didn't know when to call enough enough.

"Well, if you're free for the time being, why not take a little nap? Nothing like a round of beauty sleep!"

Linus pointed to a tent behind him. Shiori was a little hesitant, but Linus grinned. He opened up the bags on the floor to reveal five plump, pure white bird-type magical beasts.

"I caught snowbirds! Happened to see them flying while I was out on patrol."

“Wow! So many of them too!”

Snowbirds were a turkey-sized bird-type magical beast that commonly lived in rocky alpine areas, but could also be found near human settlements and at the edges of the forest when snow began to fall. It was generally believed that they migrated in search of food. Because snowbirds often set their sights on smaller livestock, it was a beast best taken care of quickly. That said, they were often quite difficult to shoot down, and this made their meat something of a delicacy.

That Linus was able to so easily take down five of them was a testament to his A-rank archery abilities. For him, hunting snowbirds was all too simple.

“Once we’ve cleaned and prepared them, you think you could make some karaage? It’ll take some time to get them all ready, so you just rest in the meantime!”

“Well, if that’s the case... I suppose I *could* rest for a little while.”

Now that she had a job waiting for her, Shiori began to feel as though she could relax. She watched Linus walk off with his snowbirds, then entered the tent, where she found a few adventurers already wrapped up in blankets, asleep. She took a spare blanket from the corner of the tent and lay down where there was space. Rurii nestled close at her side, and Shiori felt a slight warmth emanating from where they touched.

“Oh, there’s an idea,” said Shiori. “I’ll cast a heater spell in here too.”

She used the last of her magical power to cast her air-conditioning magic, warming the tent. She closed her eyes gently and found herself quickly pulled into the darkness of sleep.

“Ew, that stinks of blood! What is that pile of meat?!”

“Snowbirds! I’m getting me some karaage!”

Shiori woke to quite the commotion. She looked around in the dim light of the tent. There was no sign of anybody else—the adventurers who’d been sharing the tent with her must have already woken. Slowly, she sat up. Rurii quivered next to her and climbed onto her knees.

“I’m okay,” said Shiori. “I guess I really did need that beauty sleep.”

Though she still wasn’t completely rested, her body at least felt lighter. Her magical energy hadn’t fully recovered either, so she drank a potion to help it along. Then she stretched, folded up her blanket, and left the tent. Even though the sun had been shining in the morning, the sky was now covered in clouds. It was every bit the portrait of a wintry countryside. It looked like snow was coming.

Shiori walked over to Linus, who was talking with a few other adventurers next to a cart stacked with large pots. His freckled face broke into a smile when he saw her.

“Ah, Shiori! Get a good nap, did you?”

“I did, thank you.”

“And your face has more pep in it than before. I know it’s rough when you can’t get a proper rest, but when this is all over, we can get the guild master to give us a vacation.”

When Shiori thought of the Tris branch, which was likely running low on staff because of the aid they’d sent here, she wasn’t sure how much of a break they could look forward to. All the same, Linus’s easygoing conversation and jokes brought smiles and laughter to the faces of the people around him. His tone and attitude may have looked frivolous to some, but he was good at reading the room and considerate of his companions—he knew the power of a little lighthearted banter. It helped people to relax and always cleared the tension in the air.

“Vacations aside,” said Shiori, “this is a truly impressive amount of meat.”

Neatly cut chunks of snowbird filled the pots. One was filled with giblets, and the few people who happened to peer in that particular pot came away wishing they hadn’t looked at all.

“Ah, so snowbirds are red meat, are they?”

Shiori had been expecting something like chicken, but was surprised to find the meat was more similar to beef.

“Yep! It tastes a bit like beef or venison. There’s no odor to it, though, so that makes it easy to eat.”

If it’s red meat, that means...

“So it’s high in iron, then...?”

Though it wouldn’t have an immediate effect on those who’d lost blood, it would at least go a ways towards helping them recover. Shiori took another look in the pot of giblets and found bright red livers among the other organs. The snowbird meat was certain to be high in iron, and full of vitamins. It might have been a bit heavy for the heavily injured, but if she crushed the livers down properly or made them into a soup, she felt sure it would be nourishing.

“Is it fine to prepare these in the same way as a common chicken?” Shiori asked.

“I think so. At least, that’s how we always eat it back home.”

In that case, Shiori didn’t see any issues, though she did have to consider other ingredients. What they had immediately at hand wasn’t going to be enough.

“Did you bring any other ingredients with the aid supplies?”

“Hm... We did bring some stuff from the Guild storeroom. Uh...

Potatoes, onions, salt and pepper, and, uh... What else did we bring?"

"Baguettes and rye bread," said Marena, a spearmaster who was eyeing the snowbird meat curiously.

It wasn't often that one got to eat snowbird meat. The adventurers nearby looked suddenly hopeful, as they hadn't expected a delicious meal on a dispatch mission.

"Is there anywhere we can buy some flour and oil? I'd like to use them for the karaage, but we'll need quite a lot because there's so much meat. If necessary, though, we can use breadcrumbs as an alternative."

Linus chuckled.

"Way ahead of you."

In the corner of the cart was a bag of flour and a big pot. The pot contained a large white lump—lard, apparently. Linus said the woman who'd let them use her slaughterhouse had given it to them. When they'd offered her the wing of a precious snowbird as thanks, she'd told them it was far too much.

"I had a feeling you'd need the oil and the flour," said Linus, "so I made sure we got them!"

Perhaps he'd remembered from watching her cook on past expeditions. It made Shiori smile to see that he'd come so well prepared.

"Oh, and there's this. Apparently it goes real nice with meat!"

It was a bright red dried pepper.

"Wow. We *can* use this for the karaage! Thank you so much, Linus. Do you like spicy food?"

"As long as it's not too spicy I'm good."

"Great—I'll make some spicy karaage too."

"Can't wait! I'll leave the lunch prep to you, then!"

Linus waved goodbye and headed off to where the other adventurers were gathered. It seemed they were meeting to discuss things while they rested before lunch.

"Well then," said Shiori. "Let's get to it..."

A cooking stove had already been set up, but Shiori crafted another with earth magic—she wanted to cook a few things simultaneously. When she was ready to jump into chopping up the ingredients, she realized something important, though: she'd left her knapsack and all her equipment with a villager in town.

"My knapsack..."

"Oh, about that," said Marena, pointing to a tent. "A villager asked us to take care of it for you. You'll find it in there."

"Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you!"

Shiori made a mental note to thank the villager later. She sifted through her knapsack for what she needed, rolled up her sleeves,

washed her hands with water magic, and got started.

“Marena,” she said. “How many adventurers came from the Guild?”

“Oh, sixteen in total.”

Including me and Alec, that makes eighteen.

“How about you, Rurii? You hungry?”

Rurii pondered the question for a moment, then pointed a feeler at one of the pots. It seemed the slime was most interested in whatever giblets might be left over. Shiori took the livers out, at which point the slime happily took the pot away.

“Well, then.”

First, Shiori had to prepare the karaage. Considering they had five plump magical beasts, there’d be enough for everyone to have at least one piece. Shiori chopped up the snowbird meat with an eye for making sure she’d cook a little extra.

There were four types of meat—first, the tender and enticing thigh meat, and then the breast meat, which had a lower fat content. Then there were wings and drumsticks too. Shiori sliced the thigh and breast meat diagonally, then put them in the pot with the wings and drumsticks. She added salt and pepper, homemade ginger juice, and garlic powder, then kneaded it all carefully—she didn’t have any soy sauce, which meant she’d be making salt-flavored karaage.

Next up, Shiori decided to prepare the livers, which would be used for liver pâté and soup. She sliced them thinly, then washed them completely free of blood with water magic. While the livers were left to dry, she diced the onions and cut the potatoes into bite-size pieces.

When all that was done, Shiori set a fire under one of the big pots, added some butter from her knapsack, and began frying the onions. Once they’d gone golden, she added the liver and fried it until the surface of it changed color. She took half of the liver out of the pot so she could use it for soup, then added some herbs and cooking sake to the pot and let it all simmer until the water had dissipated.

“Time to make soup.”

While the liver pâté was stewing, Shiori melted butter in a heated pot and added the liver she’d taken out of the other pot earlier. She also threw in some onion, potatoes, and garlic powder. After she’d fried all of this sufficiently, she added water and herbs, and some of her own dried tomatoes. She let it all simmer while being careful to scoop the scum from the surface of the soup. Finally, she added a little consommé soup stock she’d made herself, put a lid on the pot, and let it all continue to simmer until the ingredients were nice and soft.

She took another look at the liver pâté pot and found that it was looking just right. She took it off the heat, let it cool, added salt and

pepper and some butter, then put the lid back on and kept it tight.

“Food Processor!”

Shiori sent her magic through to the inside of the pot, where a little whirlwind shredded all the ingredients. When she felt like it was done, she peeked inside to find everything looking very much the way she expected. She used a wooden spoon to crush everything a little more smoothly, and just like that, she had a tasty-looking liver pâté. Just to be sure, she spooned a little out and smeared it on the back of her hand to taste-test.

“Ooh, that’s rich,” she said.

Her mouth filled with wafting butter and a lavish liver flavor. It would go wonderfully with a toasted baguette.

Her audience of adventurers was glowing with anticipation, so Shiori let several of them taste a little of the pâté too.

“Mm! Delicious!”

“Wow, this is good! But I think I prefer something with a little more pepper, myself.”

“I like mine a little saltier.”

“Well, you can all adjust the taste to your liking later.”

The adventurers laughed.

“That said, I do feel this might be a little too heavy for the people who are injured.”

“I think you might be right...” muttered Shiori.

The healthy people around the camp would appreciate the rich taste of the pâté, but for the critically injured in particular, it would be far too heavy. Shiori decided to keep the pâté for the adventurers, instead.

“Let’s see how the soup’s doing.”

The soup had been left to simmer, and it, too, was looking just right. Inside of the pot was an amber pool in which all the ingredients bubbled and danced. Shiori added a little more salt and pepper, then had a little taste. It had a richness to it, but the tomato gave it a refreshing acidity.

“Taste test! Taste test!” cried Linus.

Shiori ladled some of the soup into a bowl and passed it around so the adventurers could drink it.

“Whoa, this might be just right for the injured. Let’s ask about it.”

Marena took the soup to the first aid headquarters. When she returned, she had a big grin on her face.

“They said it’s fine! They’ll pass it out to anyone who wants some.”

“I’m so glad. Thank you, Marena.”

Shiori poured the adventurers’ share of the soup into a separate pot, then the magical swordsman Ludger took it to the tents.

“Next up, the karaage.”

Shiori got some lard heating in another big pot and then made some red pepper powder. She slit the pepper down the middle and removed the seeds. She then put the seeds carefully into a little pouch, knowing that she could potentially grow more if she tried planting them. She took a nearby pot and put the pepper inside of it, then put a lid on it. She used her food processor magic to dice it all up, and her powder was complete.

Shiori split the meat up so they could be seasoned and prepared with different flavors. She readied one lot by covering it in a breading mix of flour, red pepper powder, salt and pepper, and herbs. She knew some people wouldn't want to eat spicy karaage, so she prepared the rest of the meat with the usual flour.

“I wonder if it's heated up now?”

Shiori dropped a piece of meat in the pot of lard. It fizzed loudly and a flavorful scent drifted into the air. The heat was just about right, but Shiori adjusted it again so it wouldn't get too high. Then she put the flour-covered snowbird pieces in the pot. The area around her filled with the appetite-whetting aroma of frying meat.

Shiori took a small piece of karaage from the pot. She'd cut that particular piece small especially so she could use it for taste testing. Then she cut it even smaller. It was the salted karaage made from breast meat. Because it was coated with flour alone, it had a crunchy outer shell, which was very tasty even by itself. Her mouth filled with a taste reminiscent of high-quality beef. It was wonderfully simple and a joy to eat. The adventurers, too, were all in agreement.

“Mm, that's quite good. Like a beef cutlet.”

“Such an elegant taste sensation... It's like something you'd expect from a fairly expensive restaurant.”

Next, Shiori tried the thigh meat. This, too, she cut up into smaller pieces for everyone to taste. It was tender like chicken, but with a unique and natural richness that differed from livestock. This was just how karaage was supposed to taste.

“Wow! So rich and tender! The texture is just like chicken!”

“Yep, I am definitely a thigh guy!”

The men tended to like the richer flavor of the thigh meat, while the women preferred the lighter and simpler breast meat.

Right around then, the spicy karaage was also about done. The gentle kick of the pepper really accentuated the taste of the meat, and Shiori had a feeling it might even make the thigh meat a little more appealing for some people.

“Damn, now this would go well with some booze.”

“You said it. This would be perfect with something to drink.”

Everyone seemed to like the karaage. Each person would have

their own preferences when it came to flavoring and meat types, though, so when meal time came, it'd be first come, first served.

"Oh, by the way," whispered Linus as he licked his fingers after the last bit of taste-testing. "Did this place just become the center of attention or what?"

"Er... It would seem so."

As of not so long ago, they'd felt strong stares boring into them, creating an awkward atmosphere. The knights were trying to play it cool and casual, but every one of them that passed by just couldn't help but look longingly at the food. The young knights in particular made this especially obvious.

"Whoa. So, uh... What do we do?"

"I mean, it *does* smell amazing."

Shiori looked around at everyone, then spoke.

"I've put aside enough for every adventurer to have one piece."

"And now I know why. I guess we're all going to have to be happy with one piece each."

"We don't have enough for everyone."

"Nothing we can do about it, though. I hunted enough for *our* lunch. And besides, the knights brought field rations with them."

After they reached their decision, Shiori focused on readying the karaage. A few moments later, she had a plate piled high. She split it up so there was enough for everyone, then let the people who were already at the rest area take their servings first. The karaage for the adventurers who were working or on patrol was set by the fire to keep it warm.

"Oh, Caspar!"



Shiori called out to the knight captain, who was visiting the first aid tents. He was surprised to see Shiori carrying a plate full of karaage.

“Miss Shiori. That’s, uh...?”

“It’s deep-fried snowbird. Unfortunately there’s not enough for everyone, but please help yourselves. These here are salted, and these have a spicy seasoning.”

“Well, well, quite an exquisite ingredient, I must say. And to think you’ve even prepared some of it for us... You have my thanks.”

Caspar’s stern expression lightened and he took the plate in hand. Behind him, the young knights were pretending to be busy at work, but their faces lit up as they listened to the conversation and Shiori burst into laughter. Caspar spun around and the knights all looked away at once, pretending to focus on what they were doing. But not a single one of them had fooled their superior officer.

“Those boys...” he muttered. “Thank you, Miss Shiori. We accept it with gratitude.”

“Please enjoy.”

Shiori returned to find the adventurers settling into their meals. They each took a baguette and a piece of karaage, then took some liver pâté and added salt and pepper if they needed it. Around her, Shiori listened to the sounds of people biting into their baguettes. Friends were sharing their meat between themselves so they could have a mix of salty and spicy, or thigh and breast meat, or just so they could simply enjoy tasting the karaage and comparing the differences. When Shiori turned around, she saw knights on their breaks taking pieces of karaage and eating them at the tent where the plate had been placed.

Everyone loved the food. When Shiori saw everyone so happy like this, she felt nothing but glad for the job she’d chosen for herself. Even in hard, trying times... No, *especially* during hard, trying times—that was when she found true meaning in her work. Her job was the simple act of lifting people’s spirits with delicious meals and watching them enjoy it.

I suppose this, too, is a kind of place for me to belong.

For a moment, the faces of her past companions floated into her mind.

“There was no place for you in this country the very moment we knew you were scarred. Don’t you forget it: the only people who will ever accept you as a companion are us.”

They had worn down Shiori’s willpower with mental abuse, and used her like she was little more than a convenient puppet. And even now, she still felt bound by their words. But...

You're liars, all of you. Even for me, it exists—a place where I belong.

She sent these silent words right back at them, knowing all too well that they would never reach the people she had once called her companions, the people who had constantly hurt her. But right here, in this moment, she'd made people happy. They spoke to her warmly, they accepted her, and they held her close. They were kind people, people who stayed by her side, and people who helped her to slowly heal her wounds.

I will take steps forward, and I will be more positive.

Shiori wanted to accept that part of herself that had not been able to let go and move on.

And she wanted to take those steps forward together with Alec. That was what was in her heart.

3

After patrolling the outer edges of the Blue Forest, Alec and his security detail—a group made up of adventurers and villagers—met with a knight patrol group that had started from the opposite direction.

“How are things on your end?” asked Alec.

“No problems here. All's quiet. You?”

“Same for us. No traces of magical beasts.”

The leader of the knight group, Nicholas Neumann, put a finger to his jaw and thought.

“I can't speak for how things are deeper in the forest, but the outskirts seem to be back to normal. Even the smaller wildlife has returned.”

“Animals are more cowardly than you think,” added one of the village's hunters. “First sign of a change in the air and they vanish. If they're back, we should be in the clear, I reckon.”

The other villagers nodded in agreement. They knew this area better than anyone, so their opinions carried great weight.

“In that case, I guess it's fair to say that at least the outskirts are clear of danger... A whole day has passed too, so a second assault seems unlikely. Let's think about moving all the travelers and tourists, eh?”

As of that morning, two of the knights' carriages had been made available to those who needed to move or be moved in a hurry. With the Nativity Festival so near on the horizon, many in the village were eager to be on their way. There was also the matter of the critically injured, who could not be moved into the inns until the travelers had left.

“All right. Well, I'll have a word with my superior,” said Nicholas.

“You lot swap with another group and take a break.”

“Got it.”

Alec and his group changed places with a group of adventurers who had just finished lunch. The scent that drifted from them had his stomach rumbling.

“Something smells fantastic,” Alec said.

Marena gripped her spear and laughed.

“Linus caught some snowbirds. If you hurry, you can still get some while it’s hot.”

“Wow. Snowbirds, huh? Quite the rarity.”

Snowbird meat just wasn’t common. You could only hunt them during the winter, suppression quests for them were always very difficult, and they were rarely seen in the markets. Alec had only ever eaten snowbird twice, and both times because they just so happened to be available where he was staying.

“To be honest, I would have killed for a little more,” said Ludger ruefully.

“Consider yourself lucky you even got some at all,” said Marena, poking him in the side. “We’re fortunate to have Linus around.”

Marena and Ludger both made it sound like whatever it was was quite the dish. Alec had expected a simple meal, but now he was looking forward to lunch. He waved goodbye and headed for the rest area.

Behind the first aid tents was a designated area for adventurers to rest. Alec arrived to find his fellow adventurers digging into lunch and biting into their baguettes. He saw a pot of fried snowbird and bread sitting in front of an oven, and off to the side, a lidded container filled with a pâté of some kind. He wondered if it was made with liver. Then there was the fragrant scent of soup seeping from under the lid of a nearby pot. All of it made his mouth water.

He looked around the area and spied Shiori a little ways from the group, crouched down and busy with some work. It looked like she was washing the used plates and cutlery. Rurii noticed him first, and wobbled a greeting.

“Shiori.”

At the sound of his voice, Shiori turned and broke into a smile. It was an expression that always made him feel better.

“Hi, Alec. Hard at work?”

“Looks like I’m not the only one. You didn’t push yourself, did you?”

She didn’t look pale or tired, but he thought he’d ask anyway. He couldn’t help but notice the slight pause before she answered.

“I’m...fine.”

Rurii reached out with a feeler and poked her in the neck a few times, clearly making a statement with the gesture.

“Ru-Rurii!”

The back-and-forth between them was all Alec needed to understand the situation.

“So you *did* push yourself.”

Shiori dropped her gaze.

“But I *also* made sure to take a break. I slept for about an hour.”

“But you *did* push yourself, and that’s a fact, am I right?”

“Er...”

Shiori shrunk slightly as he brought his lips close to her ear and whispered, “There’s a punishment waiting for you later.”

Shiori went completely red. She looked so frazzled that Alec burst into laughter. He told her he was just joking and watched as she struggled to regain her composure. Then he put a hand on her head and apologized for making fun of her.

“Have you eaten?” he asked.

“Not yet.”

“There are enough plates for everyone, no? Why don’t you put off the washing for now and take some time to eat?”

He didn’t think what she was doing was bad, *per se*, but he knew that her passion for work was also her weakness. Shiori’s eyes fluttered for a moment as if she was unsure where to put her gaze.

“I thought...”

“Hm?”

“I waited,” she said. “I thought we could eat together.”

Caught off guard by Shiori’s words, Alec froze for an instant. Then the meaning in them slowly began to soak into his heart, wrapping it in a gentle warmth. For the modest and reserved Shiori, these words were her utmost attempt at an invitation.

“You don’t know how happy you just made me,” Alec said.

He didn’t mind that Shiori had worked a little longer before lunch if this was the reason. He was surprised at how simple and clear his own feelings were, and he was glad for how she felt too.

“In that case, I’ll gladly have lunch with you,” Alec said.

Shiori smiled and nodded. She put the plates she’d finished washing in a pile and got to her feet.

“We’ve got karaage and liver pâté open sandwiches, along with vegetable and liver soup. There’s four different types of karaage—you can choose one. Oh, and be sure to add salt and pepper to your pâté if you need it.”

“Sounds like quite the extravagance, given the circumstances. Did you make it all yourself?”

“Yes. Linus asked me to. He’s such a big fan of karaage.”

It was probably more accurate to say that Linus was simply a fan of Shiori's cooking. After all, even when he didn't have any expeditions lined up, he still ordered Shiori's portable foods every week. It was likely that Linus, like Clemens, enjoyed having them around as light snacks or to go with drinks.

Looks like the way to a lot of men's hearts really is through their stomachs...

Though this might have been just as true for women as it was for men, Alec still felt a hint of wariness, like perhaps he should keep an eye on Linus.

"So, which one would you like?"

"Hm? Oh, right," said Alec, roused from his thoughts. He peeked into the pot of karaage.

"This is salty thigh and breast meat, and the slightly red meat is a spicy variety."

"And I can only choose one..."

Alec put a lot of thought into his selection. However, while he knew he wanted to savor the taste of that rich thigh meat one more time, the spicy flavoring piqued his curiosity. Shiori giggled at the concentration written across his face.

"Why don't we each choose something different and share?" she suggested. "It's what the others have been doing."

"In that case, I'll take the spicy thigh meat."

"Then I'll take the salty breast meat."

After choosing their karaage, Shiori cut each piece in half and put them on plates. She ladled some soup into cups, and spread some liver pâté on a piece of toasted baguette for Alec.

"How about salt and pepper?" she asked.

"That's all right, I'll have it as is."

Shiori had gone to the trouble of making it, and Alec wasn't about to ruin the flavor by drowning it in spices.

The two of them found a good spot and sat down together. Rurii bounced around, happily entertaining itself—it seemed the slime had already eaten its fill. When Shiori explained that Rurii had gorged itself on giblets, Alec paused for a moment. He'd perhaps thought too little of the slime when he'd first heard that it loved Shiori's magic water—it was much more of a carnivore than he'd expected. Come to think of it, the slime had once swallowed a giant spider whole...

"Shall we eat?"

Shiori's voice brought Alec back to reality, and he pushed the slime's dietary habits out of his mind.

Alec decided to start with the spicy karaage. There was a very pleasant crunch as he bit into it, followed by the supple toughness of the meat itself. His mouth filled with the juicy, game meat taste of

wild bird. As he chewed, the salty flavors gave way to a drifting spiciness.

“This is... This is great,” he said.

“I know. I had no idea snowbird was so delicious. We’ll have to thank Linus.”

Alec agreed, and took a sip of soup to wash down the rest of the spicy karaage so he could try the salty variety. Just like the thigh meat, biting into the breast meat filled his mouth with a juicy flavor—but it was lighter and more elegant, not unlike a beef fillet. It also lacked the unique smell of wild bird, which made it easy to eat. He felt like he might never get tired of the taste, and he also understood Ludger’s wish to eat more of it.

Once he’d finished the open sandwich with its rich liver pâté, Alec let out a satisfied sigh. There was just nothing like the satisfaction of eating the fare you were used to from the city. This was a far, far cry from flavorless field rations.

“That was incredible. Thank you,” Alec said.

“Oh, I’m just glad you liked it.”

It seemed as though other adventurers were also finishing up their meals. The big pot was empty, and the baguettes were gone. It was decided that the rest of the liver pâté would go to the person who had supplied the key ingredients, and everyone watched in envy as a grinning Linus stuffed what remained of the pâté into his knapsack. The sight of it made Alec laugh.

“Excuse me, Miss Shiori. Shall I put the pot here?”

As they began cleaning up, Caspar arrived carrying a big pot. It looked like Shiori had shared some food with the knights too.

“Oh, you didn’t have to bring it all this way,” said Shiori. “I was going to come and get it later.”

“No, I couldn’t let you do that after you so kindly shared your food with us. We washed the pot too. It’s been a long time since we had anything so good. Thank you.”

“No, thank you.”

Shiori took the pot from Caspar’s hands, and the knight straightened up a little. It looked like the pot wasn’t the only reason he’d come.

“We’ve decided on a course of action,” he said. “Also, we’ve interrogated the merchants, though admittedly the process was a bit rushed. I’ve come to report to you all on both matters.”

All the nearby adventurers gathered around. Everyone wanted to know what was coming so they wouldn’t be toiling away without an end in sight. They were also curious as to the merchants’ motives, and the punishment that they would receive.

“Let me start with how we intend to proceed. We’ve secured the

outskirts of the Blue Forest as best we can, so we can now permit travel on foot via the main road. Women, children, the elderly, and those who can't walk will be permitted to use wagons, but the rest will walk in groups with protection. We plan to do this over two days—today and tomorrow. The group leaving today will head to neighboring villages, and the group leaving tomorrow will head for the capital. I'd like to ask all of you to accompany the group tomorrow. Once it's confirmed that you've reached Tris, the request will be officially complete. The herbalist and physicker will remain with us for a little longer, but I've already organized things with them."

Alec looked around at the group of adventurers, all of whom nodded in agreement.

"That works for us," he said. "How about protection for those heading west?"

"We'll be accompanying them," said Caspar. "We need to return to our own garrison to give our report anyway. We'll leave in an hour and a half."

"Understood."

Caspar nodded, then let out a short breath.

"As for the merchants who started all of this..." Caspar's determined expression fell away for a moment, revealing exhaustion as he scratched the back of his head. "According to them, they were after the snow wolves for their pelts, and for use as pets. It seems this was at the request of a noble. They used the sleeping gas around the snow wolves' turf to put the whole pack out, but took only the pregnant young. They had intended to take a whole lot more for their pelts, but hadn't counted on how resilient the wolves would be—the gas did not last as long as they'd expected. The merchants had their hands full even with just the pregnant wolves. Also, the idiots spread a lot of that sleeping gas in the forest, and we can only hope it hasn't had an impact on the other wildlife."

The gas the merchants had used was powerful enough to knock humans out at close distance, so it wouldn't have been surprising if it could kill smaller animals.

"So they tried to make a getaway to Brovito Village, and they brought the whole pack with them," muttered Alec.

And then, as a result, the village had been made to suffer terrible losses.

"Among the injured, the garrison knights took the worst of it. The vice-captain is expected to recover, but his treatment will take weeks. As for the captain, well... His days as a knight are likely over. He'll survive, but the ligaments in his arm were badly severed—he'll be lucky if he can move it again..."

“I see...”

If the man had made it to the rank of captain, it was because he possessed the talent to be there. It was a cruel thing to hear, and it pained the heart to think of how this poor man must have felt to have his future ripped from him.

“And what will become of the merchants?”

“Once the travelers and tourists have moved out, they’ll be taken to the capital. I cannot say for certain yet just what they will be charged and prosecuted for. There’s simply no precedent for this—nobody has ever brought a pack of magical beasts into a human settlement before. But it’s unlikely they’ll escape harsh punishment. Far too many have been hurt.”

“That’s for sure...”

Shiori looked troubled, and her face grew grim as she listened. Alec put a hand on her shoulder and drew her closer. Caspar shot them a meaningful glance, then let out another sigh.

“The merchants work for a large business in the kingdom,” he said, “but given the compensation they owe, I don’t expect they’ll be in business much longer. The cost of losses will be gigantic, and the capital’s newspapers have already started sniffing around—word will spread through the kingdom quickly. Their reputation is shattered.”

Caspar spoke as if they were getting exactly what they deserved, and it was easy to sympathize with him when one thought of the innocent people who had been dragged into the incident. The merchants had taken away the livelihoods of people Caspar thought of as companions—their sins were great.

“A more thorough interrogation will take place in the capital, and there’s a chance we may once again call on you adventurers for your cooperation. I hope you don’t mind.”

“But of course.”

Caspar’s report ended there—he gave a salute and left. On his way, he patted Alec on the shoulder. Though he did not speak a word, his glance at Shiori told Alec everything he needed to know. Alec nodded in response, and the knight grinned and walked away.

“All right then,” said Alec, “let’s make today and tomorrow count.”

The adventurers split up to see to their own tasks. Shiori would clean up the adventurers’ camp and then help at the first aid tents. Alec told her not to push herself, and then he left for the entrance to Brovito Village, to meet up with the guard patrols.

given a break from night patrols because the knight brigade knew they had an early start in the morning—they needed a good night’s rest before heading to the capital the following day.

“Whoa... I am seriously beat,” muttered Ludger, sitting down and massaging his legs. He came off like an old man, but nobody else was any different. “Patrolling the same place over and over with so many prying eyes watching us... It’s surprisingly exhausting.”

“And not just physically, but mentally too...” said Marena, looking gaunt.

The adventurers were confident in their physical abilities, but they had felt the constant, watchful gaze of curious travelers on them, and circling the same places repeatedly had worn them out. The knights were far more used to it, as town patrols were part of their everyday duties.

“Everyone really put in a hard day’s work,” said Shiori.

But there was fatigue in her voice too. Shiori wasn’t used to being around people she didn’t know for such long periods of time, and it tired her. Even Rurii was somewhat deflated, having spent its free time as a plaything for the village’s children, and was now half submerged in a big pot of hot water.

“How about a footbath before dinner?” offered Shiori.

“Ah, now there’s a thought.”

Shiori had gotten the idea from watching Rurii, and the mere suggestion made everyone’s face light up with joy. At the same time, however, Marena looked a little concerned.

“Are you sure, Shiori? You’re just as tired as the rest of us.”

“It’s fine. This is nothing, really,” said Shiori, looking around for an open space. “And I’m only making a stew for dinner. Very simple. Ah—this looks like a good spot.”

It was an open area by the side of the tents where the camp was set up. It wasn’t particularly wide, but it looked like there would be enough room to create a bathing area for about ten people. First, Shiori dug out the bath itself with her earth magic, and made a wall to block the wind while she was at it. Then she filled the bath with hotter water than she would use for a usual bath, and laid out furs for people to sit on.

“It’s ready to go!” she called.

Everyone eagerly took off their boots and socks and dipped their feet in the footbath. Some people massaged their legs, while others simply lay back and relaxed. Seeing everyone’s tired faces loosen up with ease had a healing effect on Shiori.

After passing around some herbal tea, Shiori began to prepare dinner—she planned to make a stew with the freshly squeezed milk that the village’s farmers had given them. It was a simple meal that

only required chopping up ingredients and simmering them.

Firstly, she took the snowbird bones and shaved the remaining meat from them.

“Perhaps it’s a little frugal to use these, but we can still get quite a bit of meat from birds this big...”

After taking to the bones with the back of her knife, she ended up with quite the pile of snowbird meat. She beat the pile gently and made it into minced meat, then mixed it with salt, pepper, and flour, and rolled them into little meatballs. She saved the bones to use as stock for soup the following morning.

After she had cut the potatoes and onions into bite-size pieces, she put them into a big pot which she’d heated and put oil in earlier. A delicious scent wafted through the air, and once again, just like at lunch time, the stares of the knights who passed by lingered hungrily.

“I’m so sorry, but I won’t be able to make any extra this time around,” muttered Shiori, apologizing to nobody in particular.

When the time was about right, Shiori took the pot off the heat, added flour, and let it mix with the ingredients. Then she added milk, her homemade consommé soup stock, and stirred it all lightly.

“I would have loved for it to be a little more colorful...but beggars can’t be choosers, I suppose.”

Shiori added all the freeze-dried carrots she’d brought with her. She’d only brought enough for two, so it was a tiny amount to go into a meal for ten. Still, the orange of the carrots brought a pleasant brightness to the stew.

Finally, Shiori put the pot back on the heat and stirred until the stew thickened. She let it simmer, then added a little salt and pepper and butter to fine-tune the flavor.

“That smells fantastic!”

“I am starving!”

Alec and Linus had returned just in time for it to be ready, so Shiori let them be taste testers.

“Delish!” said Linus.

“A treat for weary bones...”

Now that she had their stamp of approval, all she had to do was cut the rye bread and toast it, and lunch would be ready.

“Ah, there you are. And you’re all together. Great.”

The voice came as Shiori was looking for bread in their supplies. It was Anika, the village girl.

“I came as quickly as I could when I heard you’d all be leaving tomorrow. I never got a chance to thank you all for everything you did. I do apologize for the state I’m in.”

Anika had probably been working without rest, because she looked exhausted. Her eyes landed on Shiori.

“I’m so glad to see you looking well,” she said. “That guy really had at you with his lash, right? I thought you were fine because you brushed it off so easily, but then we heard you were taken to the first aid tents and we were all really worried.”

“I’m sorry I worried you. I’m quite all right now, and thanks to the work of the physicker, it’s like it never happened.”

Shiori had worried more people than she’d expected. It was then that she truly felt a need to change—a need to be more aware of when she was hiding her condition from others. Or, more to the point, that she didn’t have to anymore. Alec put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and Anika smiled at the two of them.

“Really, thank you so much,” she said. “You helped quell the snow wolf attack, and everyone is incredibly grateful. And it was because of your work that we could see the incident to an end without having to kill the entire pack of wolves. I don’t know if we’re in a position to say this, especially since we’ll be using the dead snow wolves to support our village, but to be honest, we didn’t want to kill any more than we had to. It’s a rule of the hunt: take only what you need.”

Taking more than you needed was sure to result in some kind of imbalance. And it was because the merchants didn’t obey that rule that they’d suffered the wrath that they did. The damages they had wrought were beyond measure.

“Do you think you’ll be able to use the snow wolves you gathered?” asked Alec.

In response, Anika’s expression was somewhat troubled.

“We can use much more of them than we’d first expected. Even after taking out what was dirtied or damaged, it’s a considerable haul. As for the meat, well...aging it will take at least a month. And it will be a little longer than that before we’ll be able to start serving it at the inns.”

Anika’s face scrunched into a frown. Even though they would receive monetary reparations from the merchants, the immediate future was still uncertain and somewhat ominous.

“One month,” muttered Alec.

Linus jumped in to explain.

“We went to the forest plains earlier and spotted some magical beasts that usually never leave their turf deeper in the forest. They probably came out because of what happened yesterday. So you can see why it’s dangerous to let tourists and travelers into the forest at the moment. And the worst thing? The barrier stakes don’t work on any of those types of beasts.”

“Viewing the place at a distance, around the outer perimeter, isn’t a problem, but it will be at least a month before things return to normal and we can actually let them into the forest.”

“So as a result, there will be a lot of tourists who give the village a pass because there’s no reason for them to visit,” said Linus. “If they can only take the view in from a distance, the main road offers exactly the same sights.”

Anika sighed.

“Even if we use cuisine made from the rare snow wolf to lure people in, that won’t be ready for another month. And we can’t survive by simply selling wolf pelts in the meantime. We’re not sure what to do.”

“That’s really rough...”

A heavy silence settled over them. There was simply no escaping the fact that the snow wolf attack had hurt the village. Those who feared magical beasts would take detours around it, or otherwise pass through without stopping, even if the chance of another attack was incredibly low.

Anika looked tired, but as she ran a hand through her hair, her eyes landed on something.

“What is that?”

She was looking at the adventurers relaxing in the footbath. Most had already finished up, but those who remained were probably the most exhausted—and many of them were lying back, napping. Ludger was drooling, so Marena poked at him with the butt of her spear.

“Is that a bath of some kind?” Anika asked curiously.

“It’s called a footbath,” answered Shiori. “It’s a bath for soaking your feet to just below the knees. Back at home...er, I mean, in the east, it’s quite common.”

“Wow... A footbath, huh...?”

Anika stared at the bath for a time, thoughts bubbling around in her mind. Then she raised her head and spoke.

“Do you mind if I try it?”

“Hm? No, not at all...”

Shiori was left blinking in surprise at the unexpected request. Everyone watched out of the corners of their eyes as Anika took off her shoes and let her feet slip into the bath. Her eyes narrowed at the heat of the water, but then relaxed as she let out a long breath. It was not a sigh of fatigue, but a sigh of relief.

“Now this is nice. Feels amazing...”

The young girl closed her eyes and soaked in the comfort of the bath, then opened them again as a grin grew upon her face.

“Hey, would it be okay if we tried turning this footbath idea into a business of sorts?”

“Um...of course. You’re more than welcome to try.”

However, it was easier said than done. Without a hot spring nearby, how would the village create the right conditions? But while

Shiori was pondering this, Anika laughed.

“This village uses pechka stoves for heating. The farms near the river draw in the water, and this water is heated and run through underground pipes for warmth. I think we can make something work if we put that water to good use.”

Pechka stoves were a common heating system in Storydia. Originally, the heat from chimneys was run through pipes in the walls which were surrounded in bricks to preserve the heat. Brovito’s system was similar, though it used heated water to warm rooms instead. Usually a group of homeowners would put some money together to get a magic water heater installed.

“Ah,” said Shiori. “That *does* sound like it could work.”

“Right? I was just thinking that maybe if we put it in a place where people can see it from the main road, it might help to draw in visitors.”

“Interesting plan,” said Alec. “It won’t be easy to set up, but it’s an idea with potential.”

“I’ll have a talk with the people living near the main road and get them to help out.”

Because people wouldn’t be allowed to enter the Blue Forest for at least a month, Anika wanted something to help draw in just a few more travelers.

“How much does a footbath usually cost?”

Shiori combed through her memories for an answer.

“When they cost money, usually it’s little more than a coin. Just enough to entice people to stop by and take a short rest.”

“Okay, so the price should be inviting. Is there anything else they require in terms of setup?”

“Most footbaths have roofs. I think especially because of the snow here, cover will be essential. Some places also set up walls to block the wind. Changing rooms and a place to rent a towel if necessary. A place for bags and other equipment... Come to think of it, some places even sell snacks, though I think it’s best to avoid selling alcohol...”

Shiori wanted to be as helpful as she could, so she squeezed her memory for whatever details she could remember. Similarly, Anika made sure to listen to everything intently, and finally gave a satisfied nod.

“Thank you so much, mage. You just gave me the most intriguing idea. I don’t know how well it will work, but I’ll get talking to the village chief!”

Anika was all set to run away in her excitement, then suddenly seemed to wake up to something, and held out the package that had been in her hands the entire time.

“Wow, I almost completely forgot! I’m sorry it’s not much, but I

hope you can all enjoy it.”

“What is it?”

“It’s Brovito beef. It’s cut thin and flavored simply with salt and pepper, and it’s fantastic on skewers.”

Cheers rang out through the group of adventurers—now they had another meal to look forward to.

“Thank you so much. Are you sure, though?”

Anika pushed the package into Shiori’s hands as if to say, “Of course.”

“We gave one to the knights too,” she said with a smile. “So please, we insist. And if you like it, be sure to come back for more!”

Shiori couldn’t help but laugh at the spirit of the girl, who didn’t miss the chance to throw in a tourism sales pitch.

“In that case, we’ll eat it up right away. Thank you!”

“Well then, I may not have the chance to see you all off tomorrow, so this might be goodbye. Really, we should be the ones thanking you. I hope when everything settles down, you can come back and enjoy the sights here!”

Anika left waving, excited and energetic in a way that was completely different to the face she’d worn when she’d arrived at their campsite.

Later, Brovito would come to be well known not just for its farming and its tourism, but for its unique footbaths. Many a passerby was drawn in from the main road by the sight of weary travelers resting their swollen feet while they enjoyed the village’s beef skewers.

The footbaths offered travelers a chance to rest and recover against a backdrop of the beautiful Blue Forest, and their growing popularity helped boost tourism in the area.

Very few people ever knew that the inspiration for the footbath came from a mage from the east, but as thanks, adventurers from the Tris branch she belonged to were allowed half-price entry, and were always welcomed with open arms.

5

One day previously...

“There’s not quite the flow of refugees we expected, but there’s still no denying the fact that we’re lacking in aid supplies.”

The report was from Edvard, who was in disguise as a high-ranking knight so as not to draw suspicion. Olivier, similarly disguised, nodded. He and his entourage had just finished their inspection of the refugee camp and their carriage now rocked from

side to side on the road back to the capital. The flow of people was lower than expected, but it was still enough to fill a small town.

“They’re making do with old tents and basic hearths from the knight brigades, but they’re lacking fuel and food.”

Kristoffer, sitting opposite Olivier, frowned. Life in the refugee camp in the Krystale Plains was perhaps the most grueling in the entire country. The cold was far and away much worse than the camps in the south and southeast. But even faced with such harsh conditions, refugees preferred this to the Empire, and were grateful for the chance to live humanely. Kristoffer and the others all knew how miserable the lives of the refugees had been.

However, it would be some months before things settled in the Empire. And the longer people had to endure the life of refugees, the more they would let their grievances show.

“In the south, they were fortunate enough to have good rice harvests for the last two years. We can send both the new and the old rice, though I’m unsure how much the Empire’s people will like it.”

The people of the Empire were more used to a bread and potato-based diet, but it was unlikely they would complain. Among the lowest classes, the lucky were able to obtain potatoes and grains, but many others were getting by on grass and tree nuts. Whatever food could be gathered was then fed first to those who could work and those most likely to survive. Inevitably, it was the women and the children who died of starvation first—in other words, those who bore the future on their shoulders, and those who raised them.

For Olivier, who had never once faced starvation, it was near unimaginable.

The Empire’s power had declined in part because its military expenses had grown when it had spread itself too far and begun to require protection for all of its territory. However, this was not the only reason. The key reason was that nobody in a position of governance saw the true meaning in the falling harvest rates year over year—it was the result of years of tyranny and oppression over a people who could not meet the ever-rising tax payments. Thus, the history of the once-prosperous Empire, former rulers of the entire northern Alphandis continent, would end here.

It was said that the large number of adventurers arriving in Storydia from the Empire over the last few decades had come in search of relics from times when the land was under the Empire’s rule. Many wondered if the goal of these adventurers was to collect the relics left in old ruins and dungeons so as to add to their own wealth.

“We are fortunate for families that have offered donations, and families that have collected old clothes and blankets. We’re preparing to send these to the camps.”

Olivier wondered: was Storydia's aristocracy any more generous than the Empire's? It was almost certain that many Storydian philanthropists were generous for political reasons. Still, at present, Olivier was grateful for their generosity.

As they continued to discuss what to do next, there was a commotion outside. The sound of a horse's hooves and raised voices drew closer. Edvard and Kristoffer put their hands to their sword hilts, but relaxed when they recognized the knight outside the window. They'd seen him at a stronghold checkpoint.

"I come with a report!"

"What is it?" asked Kristoffer.

The messenger's face grew nervous.

"It's an emergency correspondence by way of messenger bird. Brovito Village was attacked by a large pack of snow wolves, and many are injured."

"What?"

Everyone's eyes grew wide. The news was entirely unexpected.

"You're sure you are not mistaken? Those beasts rarely go anywhere near human settlements. And you're saying it was a pack?"

It was understandable for Kristoffer to be suspicious. Outside of stray lone wolves accidentally wandering near human villages and towns, the snow wolf was a magical beast one did not encounter anywhere but deep in the forest. At the very least, Olivier had never heard of such a large-scale attack.

"It is most certainly true, sir. A group of merchants went deep into the forest for the purposes of overhunting. They used a contraband sleeping gas and drew the ire of the pack. In their attempt to escape, the merchants brought the pack of wolves right into the village."

"Sleeping gas? Contraband?"

There was a worried light in Edvard's eyes. As a knight concerned with the kingdom's security, this was not something he could take lightly.

"It puts the target to sleep almost instantaneously. We believe it was developed for military purposes."

"I assume there's a possibility that a noble was involved?"

"We'll need to investigate the matter thoroughly. Let me attend the interrogations."

Olivier nodded at Kristoffer's words. It was a dangerous thing for the surrounding countries to be smuggling weapons during the rebellion in the Empire, especially given the uncertainty of each country's political position. As such, everyone carried the same doubt: was the capture of the snow wolves really the merchant group's main goal?

"And what about the snow wolves?"

“There were approximately seventy of them. The garrison knights and adventurers who happened to be on hand managed to fight back and take down approximately two-thirds that number. The snow wolves left when their kidnapped pack members were released.”

“Hm...”

Those who were listening let out breaths of surprise and amazement. A pack of seventy snow wolves was S-rank difficulty. It wasn't a stretch to call the feat of repelling them a miracle. But it was a testament to the desperate struggle of the knights and adventurers who had fought. Olivier wondered if the adventurers who'd helped were experienced hands.

If I remember correctly, Alec was heading towards Brovito too...

The special investigations team had reported that Aleksey had taken a request from his “celestial maiden” and ventured into the Blue Forest. Olivier hoped he hadn't gotten wrapped up in the incident.

“One hundred and seventy-three are wounded, of which sixty-eight are considered critical injuries. This includes half of the garrison knights stationed in the area. According to the medic, several of the injured—including the garrison captain—will not be able to return to the field even after they've recovered.”

“I see. Understood. I'll look into the particulars of the matter upon my return.”

With his report complete, the knight rode off, and Olivier's carriage resumed its journey.

“Shall we head to Brovito?” Edvard asked. He glanced at Kristoffer, who was already planning how to proceed.

“No,” replied Olivier. “As much as I would like to, I'd only get in the way of things. Besides, what we need right now is to support the village and the wounded. Perhaps it would be wise to have a group of physickers return from the border.”

“I'll prepare things at once,” said Kristoffer, thinking carefully. “We'll have to secure multiple medical carriages.”

He said that a portion of the preparatory disaster relief funds could be allocated to treating the injured and to the village's recovery efforts.

According to the knight who gave the report, a relief party and supplies were already en route to Brovito. That meant their first priorities were treating the critically wounded and dispatching more knights to stand in for those whose injuries had removed them from the field. Half of the village's garrison was injured, but they would need to stay vigilant of movement in the Blue Forest, so reinforcements were a must. However, with half of the knight squad at the border, it was not an easy problem to solve.

“The kingdom's Bjorklund Trading Co. is a big-name company

that in recent years has seen great growth in its fur trade,” said Edvard. “It’s often criticized for its somewhat forceful approach to business, but it curries favor with many influential nobles on account of handling a variety of rare furs. We should investigate the family that ordered the magical beast capture and the use of a contraband substance. We cannot leave them be if they are amassing weapons and strengthening their own military position.”

Weapons smuggling and a scheme to acquire a large number of snow wolves—pregnant females, at that. Snow wolf fur was known to be used to make equipment for soldiers who could wield magic. It was also not entirely out of the question to think that the young snow wolves could be raised to follow instructions, thus making them biological weapons. It was possible that there was more to all of this than just fur and exotic pets.

“If we consider only the act of drawing the beast pack into the village,” Edvard continued, “they may be able to avoid responsibility by asserting it was unintentional. However, we have enough to prosecute on the grounds of smuggling weapons and using them illegally.”

“Then there’s the damages caused in the suppression of the snow wolves and the attack on the woman who was helping to support the defense,” added Olivier. “Pretty unforgivable stuff.”

Even if the culprits could not be tried for everything in court, the general public would be in an uproar. On top of the damages, it was all too easy to focus criticism when a big business or noble was also involved.

As Olivier, Edvard, and Kristoffer had expected, the Bjorklund Trading Co. and Count Isfeldt were charged for the smuggling of illegal weapons and the use of them within the kingdom, while the merchant group was charged with unlawful use of harmful gas, obstruction of public duties, and suspicion of assault. Under existing law, the luring of snow wolves into the village was not a chargeable offense, and was thus overlooked.

News outlets were quick to spread the news of smuggled weapons being used in the kingdom. This was big news as the nation struggled to keep the peace in the midst of a refugee crisis, not to mention a rebel uprising in a neighboring country. It was a huge story among the populace for a variety of reasons: the huge number of injured, the knights who’d bravely fought off the beasts and now struggled to regroup, the trials and tribulations of Brovito Village after the hit to its tourism industry, and of course, the attack on the female adventurer who had been in the midst of helping the efforts of the knights and adventurers. All of these feelings grew into a bolt of

criticism that was directed at the Bjorklund Trading Co. and Count Isfeldt.

As Bjorklund's reputation nosedived, its clients disappeared one after the other, and sales plummeted. The founding family attempted to repair the situation by allotting a portion of both Bjorklund's sales and its own fortune to reparations, but it had little effect on the criticism, and their business continued to suffer. Bjorklund would go bankrupt within the next two years.

Count Isfeldt, on the other hand, initially claimed to have no connection to the military weapon smuggling or the capture of the snow wolves. But when sources close to the count hinted at him having a hand in the incident, things took a turn. Under suspicion of treason and scheming to incite civil unrest, his house was searched by order of the king. Evidence was found and collected, and the count and his accomplices were found guilty. The count's family had a long history, but in recent generations it had begun to lose influence thanks to its mediocre heads of family—the snow wolf incident would mark their downfall.

It also came to light that, eighteen years prior, the count had played a role in the struggle for the right to the throne, and had led the families that had backed the defenseless third prince and illegitimate son of the king in an attempt to seize political power. This brought forth the furious rage of Olivier Fersen Storydia, the fourth prince who would eventually become king. The truth of it all, down to the fierce investigation and guilty verdict for Isfeldt, was an unspoken secret shared only between those who were well aware of the circumstances.

Olivier cared deeply for the third prince, with whom he shared a father, and for whom he had created a way to escape the royal family when it became too much for the third prince to bear. He had no intentions of providing even a hint of forgiveness to the count, who had dirtied his hands with illegal activities for the sake of profit.

6

Early morning, before sunrise:

The day's breakfast was root vegetable soup with stock made from snowbird bones, and open sandwiches of buttered rye bread sprinkled with herbs. Shiori also grilled the last of the beef they'd received from Anika. It was nothing if not lavish—a feast of fresh Brovito produce. After breakfast, Alec and the adventurers took down their camp.

When he was sure that preparations for their departure were complete, Alec turned to Nils and Ellen, who had come to see them off and have a little breakfast.

"The rest is up to you," Alec said. "Sorry for heading back early."

"We'll be fine, Alec," said Nils. "I expect we'll be back in just a couple of days anyway."

"A group of physickers from the refugee camps are returning to Tris," added Ellen. "That's where the critically injured will go, and we're scheduled to accompany them."

Nils and Ellen smiled wearily as they spoke. Apparently, a medic squad was being dispatched from a neighboring town's knight brigade too.

"Glad to hear it. Do your best out there, but don't push yourselves."

"Good idea. Wouldn't want to do that."

"Got it. No pushing ourselves."

There was an unspoken message in the grins they shared, and Shiori felt suddenly awkward. Her eyes darted around for somewhere safe to rest. Rurii, however, jumped into the air with delight, making Alec, Nils, and Ellen laugh. Shiori looked a bit troubled at first, and her eyebrows drooped, but eventually she, too, broke into something of a pained smile as she held out a package for Nils and Ellen.

"Um, this... This is for you two. I don't think we'll need it on the way home."

It was Shiori's homemade field rations—soup and risotto. She'd labeled everything so it wouldn't get mixed up.

"Wow, thank you! We'll sneak them in during breaks," said Nils.

"To be honest, the knights have the most horrendous fare..." Ellen agreed.

They shared an uneasy glance.

"We can't judge them too harshly given the circumstances...but there are limits, you know?" said Nils. "That thing they called a 'stew' last night? It was little more than a milky... Oh, I don't even know what you'd call it..."

"Yeah... Half-cooked vegetables swimming in incredibly fatty milk. And a weird scum floating around on the top of it... We would've been better off with plain old heated milk instead of whatever *that* was."

"And the beef was so hard I couldn't even chew it. It feels like some kind of jaw workout. They just grill it for such a terribly long time..."

Nils and Ellen's eyes went blank. It seemed the greatest cause of their fatigue was actually the food. The two had ostensibly come to see their fellow adventurers off, but it was just as possible they'd had enough of the knights' food and fled. The other adventurers chuckled at the fact that they'd gotten better meals thanks to Shiori, but all anyone could do now was pray that Nils and Ellen were properly fed

for their remaining days on duty.

“Well, we’d better be off. The travelers are probably all ready to go.”

“Got it. Be safe.”

“See you in a few days.”

Alec, Shiori, and their adventurer party headed off for the village entrance, where a lot of travelers and tourists had already gathered. Children and the elderly were sitting in the priority carriages. As for protection, there were also two knights as well as the adventurers from other branches who had gotten caught up in the incident. Everyone departed as one big group, heading for Tris.

Outside of those given priority seating, everybody was on foot. It was a large group of some fifty citizens, fourteen adventurers, and four knights who served as the group’s liaison. Assuming nothing out of the ordinary came up, they could expect to arrive in Tris the following day.

Though some of the travelers were still worried and uncertain, most were simply relieved to be on the move again. They’d been held up for two whole days, and most wore bright, positive expressions.

Once he had confirmed each traveler on his list of those heading out, the knight brigade representative, Nicholas, informed everybody of the rules and what to watch out for.

“Our destination for this journey is Tris. I apologize to all of you who came to these parts for sightseeing, but please don’t leave the group during breaks or when we set up camp. Do not visit tourist destinations. However, if anyone falls ill or gets hurt, you will be allowed to stop at villages along the way, so please don’t hesitate to say something if that’s the case. We can be flexible in this respect.”

Everyone listened to Nicholas with some nervousness.

“No need to use your search magic on this trip,” whispered Alec to Shiori. “Put your energy levels first, okay?”

Shiori nodded obediently.

“Okay. That’s what I’ll do, then.”

He wrapped a hand softly around her shoulder.

“You’re going to be busy once we start getting the camp set up. We’ll have to divide up the work because of how many people there are. Will you be all right?”

Shiori’s eyes wandered to the knights’ carriages, which were loaded with camping gear, blankets, and food supplies.

“I can’t say for certain... I’ve never had to cater to so many people before. I think the best I can do is provide heating and food.”

“Our meals today are supposed to be field rations,” said Alec, “but if for some reason they decide to cook something, I hope you’ll give them a hand.”

A slight shiver ran down Alec's spine as he remembered Nils and Ellen's comments from earlier. Realizing what he was getting at, Shiori giggled.

"It probably won't be a very nice meal if it consists of something that only resembles soup, and meat that is too tough to chew..." she conceded.

"You said it."

Until Shiori and her housekeeping mage job had come along, there weren't that many adventurers who were very good at cooking. This was especially true of the men, who mostly made do with dried meats and biscuits. Sometimes people cooked when they pined for something hot, but the taste was often questionable. Even then, the adventurers ate it all the same—they were glad for the chance to eat something warm in the midst of their travel.

Alec, however, had grown all too accustomed to Shiori's warm, delicious meals while on expeditions. It was not something to take lightly either—with just a single meal, the rate of recovery from fatigue and the probability of request completion both increased. He'd even heard that others had taken it upon themselves to better understand cooking in the field when they heard how important it was.

"Okay, then once we arrive, I'll see how things look and help out if they need me," said Shiori.

"Sounds good."

Once the direction to their expected camping grounds was decided, the group was ready to set off. Everyone prepared themselves and began the walk for Tris. It would be the first time in a few days that Alec and Shiori would be home.

The roads were more peaceful than anyone expected, and there was nothing out of the ordinary save for the occasional magical beast wandering by the roadside. It seemed they were encountering more beasts than usual—a stark reminder that the merchants' meddling in the forests had indeed had an effect. Any magic beast that made it through the barrier stakes along the main road was swiftly handled by the adventurers and knights, though.

The travelers were naturally rattled by the appearance of beasts, but none were overcome by panic, and they even grew somewhat used to it. This was probably due to the growing understanding that they were protected by both barrier stakes and experienced bodyguards.

Rurii bounced around at people's feet as if to cheer them up and encourage them, and the slime's efforts were effective. The cute and energetic slime filled the travelers with laughter and smiles. In this way, the group moved on, took occasional breaks, and arrived at the

day's campsite as the sun was setting. They were making good time.

"Let's set up camp here," said Nicholas.

The travelers looked at one another with relief on their faces, finally glad for a chance to properly rest. It was unfortunate that so many of them had come to the village to enjoy the scenery only to get wrapped up in such a terrifying incident.

"We're happy to set up the tents and prepare the food," said Nicholas to the adventurers. "But how about you lot? If you like, we have enough field rations for everyone."

A slight nervous spark ran through the air. All the adventurers were worried about the same thing. Nicholas went on.

"We know field rations aren't exactly the tastiest of foods, so we mean to whip up a soup to go with it."

A strange, tiny yelp of fear rang out from somewhere in the back of the group. It sounded like it came from Linus or Ludger—clearly, they remembered the stories about the knights and their awful meals. But even Alec wanted to avoid the food if it was at all possible. He was also worried that for the travelers, who had already been put through so much, the meal might turn them sour.

"If that's the case, please leave the cooking to me," said Shiori. "I've got a lot of experience when it comes to cooking at campsites."

Nicholas was a little hesitant at Shiori's gentle suggestion, but in the end accepted her offer.

"We really appreciate it," he said. "To be honest, we're not particularly great when it comes to cooking."

For all the men they had who were courageous in battle, the knights didn't have many who also happened to be good cooks. This was so true, in fact, that talented cooks were in high demand and often scooped up by higher-ranking knight brigades. That was the food situation for the knights of the kingdom, and having now caught a glimpse of it, Alec and Shiori were left unsure of what to say.

While Shiori gathered some of the female adventurers to help her with dinner, another group went down to the river to look for fish. With smiles on their faces in the hopes that dinner might end up as another delicious treat, everyone started setting up the tents and barrier stakes.

Because the camping gear belonged to the knights, the barrier stakes and tents were all specially designed. The metal stakes were larger than usual and covered a wider radius, meaning fewer of them were necessary. The tents, too, differed from the kind usually sold to adventurers—they were larger, like the tents used for first aid. Simple beds were brought in that at first glance seemed too small, but would serve just fine if pushed together so people could share them.

Travelers were allowed into the tents as they were set up. While

most of them planned to rest until dinner, those with camping experience and those with extra energy offered to assemble tents or otherwise help out with the cooking preparations.

“Ah, thank you,” said Nicholas to a woman who must have been in her forties. “We really appreciate it.”

The woman was steadfast, most likely the head of her household, and she laughed.

“Happy to help. We’ve been on the receiving end for more than long enough now.”

It wasn’t quite like home, and some were a little worried about how different things were on the campsite, but the women enjoyed keeping themselves busy by peeling vegetables and slicing bread. Having so many helping hands freed Shiori from having to do those kinds of tasks, and so she went about heating the air within the barrier stakes.

“No trouble?” asked Alec. “It’s a bigger space than usual.”

“This is *much* easier than yesterday, when I went around doing it for twenty or so tents one after another.”

She looked tired, and yet the gentle smile she always wore had not faded.

“I wish I could be of more help...” muttered Alec.

Alec specialized in attack magic, and Shiori’s subtler and more detailed spells were difficult for him. However much he tried, his own spells were always too powerful. Were he to even attempt it, the best anyone could expect was a blazing inferno within the barrier stakes. And if someone of Nadia’s experience tried it, it was virtually guaranteed that she would turn everyone to mummies in an instant. Air-conditioning magic was something only a very few people could master. Alec would not be very helpful in this regard.

“The right tool for the right job, as they say,” replied Shiori. “And after all, it was you who taught me that we each find our own ways to contribute to the team.”

With his own words used against him, Alec was left unable to argue.

“Well then, when you finish your work, you rest,” he said. “No need to worry about guard duty tonight. We’ll pick up the slack.”

“Huh? Oh, I couldn’t let you do that...”

“It’s not just you, so no need to worry. Preparing the food is no small job. If that’s what the women are doing, then the least us men can do is make up for it by keeping watch over the evening.”

He’d already talked to Linus and worked out the details. Including the knights, they had fourteen men. If they split into groups of four or five and did three-hour shifts, they’d be fine.

“Thank you, Alec. You’re so kind and considerate.”

“It’s nothing. It’s what companions do—we compensate for each others’ weaknesses.”

Shiori was creating a climate inside the campgrounds that was so pleasant it was near impossible to imagine you could find it out in the wild like this. The work they each did balanced out between them.

“Thank you...”

Shiori smiled softly and cast her air-conditioning magic. It took a little longer than usual because of the larger space, but gradually the air began to warm. People seemed to notice the change around them, and looked around in wonder.

“Ah, so it was you who warmed the first aid tents back at the village, then.”

Nicholas noticed Shiori and spoke to her. She replied with a silent smile.

“I’d heard rumors about a mage who made use of unique and intriguing spells, and I must say, you haven’t disappointed. This is wonderful. No other word for it but comfortable.”

“You’re too kind.”

It was a scene Alec had witnessed often since getting to know her—someone would praise Shiori, and she’d just play it down, her eyebrows drooping slightly as she worried about how to respond.

“Ow! I can’t get my boots off!”

“My feet are all swollen.”

“Not all that surprising. We’ve been walking all day. My legs are beat.”

“It’s rough when you’re always trying to keep pace with the group.”

Travelers let out groans and complaints as they walked by, and it spurred a conversation with a few others. Alec saw the ever-so-slight way in which Shiori reacted.

Uh-oh, looks like she’s up to old habits again...

Alec couldn’t help but chuckle. He already knew where this road would lead. Rurii knew too, and poked Shiori in the neck.

“I haven’t done anything yet, Rurii,” she said.

“Based on the way you say that, can I assume you *do* intend to do something, though?”

“Just a footbath. I’m sure it’d be best for everyone if they had a chance to ease their exhaustion, no?”

Shiori told them water magic was easy to cast with a source of water nearby, and then she took off. It was who she was—she simply couldn’t leave a person in need. She did her very best so as not to rely on the help of others, and yet she was always the first to reach out with a helping hand. Alec just hoped it wasn’t at the cost of her own energy and health.

Shiori found the meaning of her existence in helping others. And Alec felt that whenever she did so, the smiling faces of gratitude she received nourished her soul. This was the very reason he couldn't bring himself to more forcefully stop her.

When she tires, I will be the place she can rest.

This was how Alec had come to think over the last few days. What Shiori needed now was not to change—she needed a place that would bring solace and comfort to her heart. A place that would ease her mind when she returned to it.

And Alec hoped he could be that place for her.

I am here when you need me.

Alec walked over to Shiori, who amazed nearby travelers as she created a footbath in an open area of the camp. He put a hand gently to her back, and when she looked up at him, he smiled down at her. She returned his smile, and there was relief in it.

“Wow, a footbath today too?”

The adventurers who were free until their guard shifts knew the footbaths well. They quickly took off their shoes and boots, and sunk their feet in the water to relax. The sight drew in many a curious set of eyes.

“Can I try? Uh... You just put your feet in, right?”

“Please feel free,” said Shiori. “It will help ease the swelling of your feet. There's not a lot of space, so we'd appreciate it if you could rest for ten minutes before giving someone else a turn.”

When the travelers heard it had natural relaxing and healing properties, everyone wanted in. Using the adventurers as a model, people timidly soaked their feet in the water.

“If by chance anyone happens to have ringworm or any other skin ailment, please don't enter the water. We don't want it to spread, so I will make you a separate bath.”

At Shiori's comment, one of the knights watching over the proceedings glanced at Nicholas's feet, then casually went back to looking at the footbath. Nicholas's face scrunched up like he'd just eaten something that didn't agree with him. Whatever passed between the two was over in a mere instant, but Alec understood what it implied, and his eyes met Shiori's with a subtly meaningful look.

“Um... I will make you a separate bath...”

“You have my thanks.”

Nicholas's head drooped. Alec felt sympathetic for the man, and gave him a pat on the shoulder. In this way, Nicholas and the others suffering from ringworm were able to enjoy the footbaths too.

Once everyone had rested their weary feet in the footbath, it was time for dinner. On the menu was recently fished Tris salmon fillets in

soup, and hard rye bread. Everyone ate the bread their own way; some ate it as it was, others spread butter or jam on it, and others still softened it in their soup.

“We often talk about sweets when we’re tired, but actually the body craves something savory along with it, don’t you think?”

Shiori aired the thought after she’d eaten some bread spread with sweet berry jam, and followed it with a sip of her soup. Marena agreed wholeheartedly.

“So true. When I first became an adventurer, I was so happy to buy whatever I wanted that I stocked up entirely on sweet food rations and dessert snacks for an expedition. Boy, did I regret that—I would have killed for some jerky near the end of *that* experience.”

“Flavor balance is so crucial,” added Linus. “This one time I was in a rush so I only bought biscuits and cans of salt-preserved foods. Partway through that outing, I was so desperate for something sweet that I practically drowned myself in snow violets!”

The group of adventurers were alight with jokes and tales of their own food mishaps. As Alec listened, he thought back to his own past and his own youth. Once, in his early twenties, he and Clemens had gotten their hands on some game bird meat and the result was an utter disaster. They had no idea how to dress or clean it. They didn’t even know they had to dispose of the innards and the feathers, so they just roasted it as it was and were left with a most foul-smelling meat. Worse still, the taste of it haunted their breaths for a long time after.

“Flavor is one thing, but then there’s nourishment to consider too, yeah? Keep that in mind when you stock up on food for an expedition. It makes a world of difference for how you feel.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Until Shiori taught me about this, I had never actually thought about it.”

“You feel like you’ve got more energy. No slumps in energy levels either.”

Meals for adventurers mainly consisted of bread with jerky and canned fish. What they knew now, however, was that the addition of vegetables and bottled fruit had quite the impact on their physical conditions. According to Shiori, bread, meat, and fish were sources of energy, but vegetables and fruits helped one maintain a healthy diet, and in following, a healthy lifestyle. It wasn’t always easy when you were out on an expedition, but if it was at all possible she always recommended adding something fresh to a meal. If you needed something that you could keep on hand, potatoes and berries were good.

Everyone took gratefully of their meals with the added knowledge that the root vegetables in their soup and the berry jam for their bread had significance beyond simply sustaining them. Suddenly, they

became aware of a commotion on the high road—the sounds of horses approaching. Everyone grew tense as they waited to see what was going on.

The horses came to a stop at the campsite. There were two of them, and the adventurers watched as one of the knights on guard duty spoke with them. The two horse riders were also knights. So something *had* happened. After discussing something briefly, they made their way into camp. As they approached Nicholas, who had already finished dinner and was sipping at a cup of tea, there were tense looks on their faces.

“What is it?”

“A number of the arrested merchants have escaped.”

“Escaped?”

The merchants had been locked in the garrison jail. The knight’s report caused a stir in the immediate area.

“It seems they had help hiding out in a nearby village. They waited until you’d left, when our defenses were lowered. The fault lies with us. We were unprepared and they took us by surprise. They were mixed in with a group of travelers who were passing through the village. They used the same sleeping gas as with the wolves—spread it around the garrison, and once the knights were knocked out, they unlocked the cell.”

So, some people still had access to the sleeping gas. Yes, it was true to say the knights had slipped up, but they were already at a disadvantage—the merchants had taken advantage of an emergency situation, and the understaffed knights couldn’t react quickly enough.

“Half of them were recaptured before they could make it out of the village, but two escaped along with the two who organized the jail escape—four in total. They’re still at large. They used that gas again in the struggle, and—damn it all!”

Clearly frustrated, the knight was unable to maintain his composure through to the end of his report. Nicholas gave him a pat on the shoulder.

“I understand the circumstances,” he said. “Did they head towards Tris?”

“Yes, they were seen fleeing in this direction. We pursued them on horseback but couldn’t locate them. If you didn’t see them during your travels, it’s possible they fled into the forest.”

“The forest? After what happened? That’s practically suicide.”

As a result of the snow wolf attack, dangerous magical beasts had come down to the outskirts of the forest. If the merchants were armed with only sleeping gas, their chances of survival were slim at best. The knight nodded.

“I agree, but if they haven’t been seen, then there’s no other place

they could have gone.”

One side of the road from Brovito to Tris was the forestlands, while the other was grasslands with only low rolling hills. If knights on horseback had lost sight of the fleeing merchants, the most obvious reason was that they’d entered the forest. There was also no sign that they had acquired horses or carriages as they fled.

“Let’s break into two groups,” said the knight. “I will head to Tris and report to the knights there. We can’t have such dangerous people entering the kingdom.”

“Understood. We’ll be on guard here too. If anything happens, we’ll send someone on horseback immediately.”

“Understood.”

With their report given, the knights headed off immediately.

“We’ll have to search the forests now too. It’s just one thing after another...”

Nicholas glanced at the travelers returning to their tents after finishing their meals, and sighed.

“Please,” he said to all the adventurers, “be on the lookout for anyone out of the ordinary while you’re on guard. If you see anything, report it immediately.”

Everyone nodded, resolute.

Oh, you fools.

Rurii quivered the thought as it slid next to Shiori, who was tidying up after dinner.

You would have lived slightly longer had you only chosen not to run away.

The merchants had been given a pass, their crimes overlooked, and yet by fleeing into the forest to avoid the punishment they deserved, they had entered the courtroom of the forest itself—a place of judgment. They had left the world of reason, and their lives were now null and void.

Rurii’s thoughts were connected to its brethren. Rurii was them, just as they were Rurii. All the lapis-colored slimes had divided from the same body, and their consciousness was shared. And through this shared consciousness, the viewpoints of Rurii’s compatriots flowed into the slime’s mind.

“Oi! Are you sure we’ll be all right?”

The man was short of breath, and he shouted at his partners as they ran through the darkness.

“As long as we’re close to the main road, we’ll be fine! Now shut up and keep running!”

“If we took the main road like idiots we’d get caught anyway!”

The two men who'd planned the escape shouted back at him excitedly. And the man knew they were right. There was no other way to escape their pursuers except by passing through the outskirts of the forest. If they could just get away, the boss and the client would be able to help them out.

However, they didn't know what to make of the eerie silence. The only sounds around them were their footsteps as they ran and their ragged breathing. It was almost like something was watching them with bated breath. But that was impossible...

"Gaaah!"

There was a scream from behind the three men, then the sound of a body slumping to the ground.

"What the hell are you doing back there?! Get to your feet and—"

But those words were cut short. The men turned back to see what had happened...

"Ahhh!"

Their breath caught in their throats at the sight that met their eyes—their fellow merchant covered in lapis-colored slimes.

Sptch.

An odd watery sound filled the air, and another man fell.

Sptch. Sptch.

"Ah... Ah..."

Surrounding them were slimes of a variety of colors. They wrapped themselves around the men's arms and legs, binding them before dragging them into the darkness of the forest.

"Let go of me, you damned...!"

The men struggled desperately but the gluey binds did not give. They writhed as the slimes proceeded deeper into the forest, arriving finally at a small open plain surrounded by trees. Only then were the men released. But it was not because they had been freed. They had been brought forth to the place of judgment.

The slimes slunk away into the darkness, and were replaced by...

"Eek!"

One of the men squealed. They had lost the ability to speak. They could only stare, wide-eyed, at the sight that now stood before them.

They were surrounded by a pack of snow wolves. And the men knew exactly who they were. It was the very pack they had gassed—the very pack they had stolen from.

Ugh...

Then the men realized. It was here, in this place, at this moment, that their lives would end. The leader of the wolves—who was much larger than the others—let out a howl, and the pack bared its fangs. Cries of agony rang through the air as the wolves attacked with tooth and claw.

A few days later:

A knight brigade searching the forest discovered the bones of four men. Based on the fang marks, it was believed the men had been killed by magical beasts—most likely snow wolves. Items left at the scene identified the men as the merchants who had attempted a jailbreak.

The team concluded its search, and the remaining suspects in the case were delivered to the capital without incident.

Chapter 2: The Conclusion of the Case

1

The following morning, snow fluttered down from low-hanging clouds, and thin piles of it could be seen outside the campsite's barrier stakes. The scenery was a wonderland of white, and it was clear that the snow that fell now would likely last to the end of the long winter. Snow paths made for a harder journey, but everyone was glad to know that Tris was close enough to be reached by nightfall.

"You feeling okay? I heard you wake up a few times during the night," said Alec.

Shiori had woken twice to recast her air-conditioning magic. Alec gave her a worried look as she sat, eating quietly, by his side. She sipped her bowl of onion soup and tilted her head in thought.

"Hm... I think I might be a bit tired," she said. "A bit sleepy, perhaps."

Though she had hesitated at first, ultimately she told Alec the truth. To be sure, this journey had seen her struggle through conditions far unlike a regular expedition. Alec, too, was exhausted, and Rurii trembled in agreement as it devoured its own helping of soup and bread. The slime was nothing if not a hard worker.

"We just have to make it a little further," said Alec. "Then we'll arrange for some time off."

"Just what we need..."

Rest was a part of the job, and the Guild's own rules stated that adventurers were expected to take at least one day off between expeditions. Given the circumstances of this particular request, however, nobody would complain if they took more than that.

Compared to how he had felt when he was in his twenties, Alec could feel his exhaustion lingering and weighing him down. He didn't want to admit it, but he simply wasn't as young as he used to be.

"Guess I'm starting to feel my age," he muttered.

Rurii trembled once, then twice, seemingly conveying the sentiment, "*You can say that again.*" At this, Alec looked down at the slime in stony silence. The slime then shook as if nothing had happened at all, and went back to its breakfast.

"You little jerk..."

Alec poked at the slime, which writhed a “*Knock it off.*” Shiori tried to hide her giggling, and Alec gave her something of a sulky glance before finishing his soup.

After breakfast, the group left the campsite and headed for Tris. The snow paths were cold and tiring, so they took multiple short breaks to snack on their rations and keep their energy levels up.

Eventually they made it out of the Blue Forest proper, and the scenery around the main road transitioned to the more familiar conifer trees, where magical beasts were much less of a problem. They took breaks in places that were free of piled snow, and Shiori dried the damp ground where they rested so people’s clothes wouldn’t get wet, passing around some restorative herb tea while she was at it.

“I have taken quite the liking to you,” said a plump woman to Shiori. “I think I’d even like to have your help when we get home. It’ll be in the royal capital—does that sound amenable to you?”

The woman laughed as she spoke, and Alec couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. All the same, he wasn’t going to let anyone take Shiori as far as the royal capital, so he subtly tugged her away from the woman, drawing chuckles from his fellow adventurers.

The group finally arrived in Tris before nightfall. After showing their identification papers they entered the city, and the travelers erupted into cheers. They were completely taken by the sight which lay before their eyes—the city was decorated colorfully for the Nativity Festival.

“Looks like they finished putting up all the decorations while we were gone.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Before Shiori and Alec had left, the decorations covered the road leading to the cathedral until the edge of the Second District, but in just a week they’d extended beautifully into the Third District. The usual orange magic lamps had been replaced with specially designed glass lanterns. Businesses were adorned with embroidered flags that hung from their signboards, and there were more food stalls than normal along the roadside. Even the snowfall hadn’t slowed people from coming and going, and everyone looked bright and happy. The whole city was filled with a lively, vigorous energy.

“Adventurers, we can’t thank you enough. Given the current circumstances, it’s possible we may call on you again for suppression and protection requests. We’ll be in touch.”

Having dismissed the travelers, Nicholas signed the request ticket and passed it to Alec.

“Understood. We’ll be ready.”

Nicholas gave a neat salute, then departed for the knight squad’s

headquarters with his men in tow. Alec watched him go, then headed for the Guild to make his report.

When the adventurers arrived at the Guild, they were met with words of congratulations and friends coming to greet them. It was only then that they felt the ordeal was truly over, and a weight fell away from their shoulders. Some adventurers relaxed against the walls, while others sat at empty seats and collapsed across the tables in front of them. This request had been far from what they were used to, and everyone was completely drained.

“Good work, everyone,” said Zack, once he’d confirmed the request ticket. “I’ve made sure your rewards come with a little extra—a special bonus.”

The Guild buzzed with excitement at his words. Zack went around talking to everyone as he handed out their rewards.

“I want you all to take two or three days off,” he said. “If anything urgent comes up, I’ll be in touch.”

He didn’t expect any of them to apply for leave—he was happy for them just to take it. That was the extent of his kindness. Most of the dispatched adventurers sighed with relief, then left after sharing a few words with the adventurers who were still on duty.

“See you all later!”

“I’ll be taking my leave then, Master Alec!”

“Make sure to rest well, Shiori!”

Zack waited for everyone to leave before speaking to Shiori and Alec.

“So you two were caught up in that, after all. What a mess.”

He let out a defeated chuckle and ruffled Shiori’s hair. It simply wasn’t something you did to a grown woman, but she was smaller than the average Storydian and the perfect height for it. More than her youthful appearance, it was actually this fact that had fooled Zack into thinking she was a young girl when he’d first taken her into his care four years ago.

“We’d planned to come back as soon as our request was done...then all hell broke loose.”

It had taken a few more days than either of them had counted on. Alec didn’t know if the materials he’d gathered were damaged. He’d have to ask Bertil to take a look at them, but he knew that depending on their condition, he might have to head back out into the field. And now that entry into the Blue Forest was under tight control, he’d probably have to try his luck at a different location.

“It sure sounded like a disaster,” said Zack. “And a man-made one, at that. Can’t get much more out of the ordinary than a pack of snow wolves attacking a village. You can give me a detailed report later.”

The unprecedented nature of the attack meant that information

about it was especially helpful, even necessary, in case a similar attack were to ever occur. On top of that, snow wolves were a rarely seen magical beast, and detailed information on them would be in high demand.

“And no injuries? You got into it with the pack, I imagine.”

Alec and Shiori tensed at the question. They both knew how sensitive Zack was about Shiori getting injured, and they also understood why. Shiori gave Alec a little poke that said, “What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” but all the same, Alec couldn’t not answer.

“I got out of it with a few scratches. Shiori was injured.”

Zack’s expression hardened in an instant.

“It wasn’t the wolves,” said Shiori, adding context in a panic. “I got into an argument with one of the culprits. That’s how it happened. But no need to worry—Ellen already healed it up. It’s as good as new.”

“So you’re telling me,” said Zack, “that you had a bodyguard, and you *still* got injured?”

This was essentially true—there was no escaping it. The adventurers and staff nearby looked over at the three of them, sensing the sudden change in the air.

“We were working separately!” Shiori said. “Alec and Rurii were fighting the wolves and I was helping to support the others. That’s when it happened! It wasn’t Alec’s fault!”

“Shiori,” said Zack, his eyes growing wide, “you really...”

He took her words and chewed on them thoughtfully for a time. Then he sighed as Rurii poked him in the legs. It seemed the slime had an opinion on the matter too. He looked down at it, let out another sigh, then mussed up his own hair.

“All right, all right,” Zack said, sounding defeated. “You can give me the full report later. As for today, go home. Rest. The two of you must be exhausted.”

Zack handed them both their rewards for the Brovito Village incident. Shiori let out a sound that was half chuckle, half a sigh of relief, and turned to say a few words to Rurii. While she did this, Zack turned to Alec.

“Alec,” he said, his voice low.

“What?”

“You mind if I visit tonight? I won’t stay late.”

It was very much like Zack to ask permission instead of simply stating he would visit—it was a mark of his character, in fact.

“Sure. I want to ask you about some things anyway. I’ll have some drinks ready.”

Zack nodded.

Night fell early during winter. It was only just past four in the afternoon, but the veil of night was already beginning to fall as Alec and Shiori left the Guild. The magic lanterns in the city streets glowed beautifully. With the city decorated for the Nativity Festival, there were lots of people out and about, even in the evening. Delicious scents drifted from the outdoor stalls, drawing people in with their warm lighting.

“There’s so much food,” muttered Shiori as she peeked at the different stalls. “Perhaps I’ll buy something for dinner tonight.”

Shiori didn’t have much energy left for cooking now that she was home. The words had barely left her mouth before Rurii was pointing with a feeler at a stall. The delicious scent of grilled meat floated from it, whetting both their appetites.

“You really are a carnivore, aren’t you...?” muttered Alec, as Shiori bought her slime a meat skewer. The slime, for its part, trembled with supreme satisfaction.

Alec went looking for some snacks that would go with a few drinks. There was a decent chance Zack would bring something with him when he came, but Alec could always give Zack the leftovers as a late-night snack.

Shiori didn’t seem particularly hungry herself—she only bought a small sandwich filled with sugared fruit and jam.

Alec walked Shiori back to her apartment. When they arrived, she stopped and looked up at him. This was something she did naturally—she was short enough to be mistaken for a young girl, and Alec was quite tall, even among Storydians. There was a considerable height difference between them.

“Thank you for everything,” she said. “And...sorry for making you worry so much too.”

“It’s nothing. *I’m* sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

Alec hadn’t even noticed that she’d gotten hurt, and yet she had still covered for him earlier when Zack had reacted to their tale with anger.

“Like I told Zack earlier, we were working separately. There was nothing you could have done. And it wasn’t right of me...to hide it, I mean. If I’d just told you all the truth, it wouldn’t have become such a big problem.”

For adventurers, who put themselves in danger as part of their work, it was important to report when things like that happened. To not do so was a failure of responsibility. However, Alec felt it was cruel to say as much to Shiori—she had been caught up in an active crime and gotten injured as a result, and she already carried horrible physical and mental scars. Perhaps he was going too easy on her, but he decided to save it for another time.

“Perhaps it’s not right of me to say this, being that I couldn’t protect you, but I want to be your strength,” said Alec. “To be by your side, and to protect you through hard times.”

He took her dainty hand and kissed her fingertips, just as he had on the day he had decided she would one day be his.

“If you’re still frightened of joining a fixed party, how about teaming up with me? Just the two of us. Nothing to be scared of, really.”

Shiori’s dark brown eyes went wide with surprise.

“But we’re different ranks,” she said, “and the requests we can accept are different, no?”

“It’s not at all uncommon for a party to contain members with different ranks, and there’s not a big difference between A and B-ranks. There will be plenty of requests we’ll be able to tackle together. And I don’t intend to bind you to me exclusively, of course—you’re free to take on requests of your own too.”

When he pointed out they could work in a way that wouldn’t put too much of a strain on her, she seemed a little worried. But it wasn’t too negative of a response.

“You don’t have to answer me right away,” he said. “Just think about it.”

“I will. Thank you, Alec.”

She smiled, though she was still deep in thought. He put his hand to her cheek, then leaned down and gently kissed her. As she tenderly accepted his affection, he thought of her as so precious. He told her to rest well, then said goodbye and left.

It was well after sundown, when the city streets were lit by magic lanterns.

Lache had just finished cleaning up after hanging the Nativity Festival decorations, and looked out towards the entrance to the apartment building, beaming with satisfaction. He let out a pleased sigh and decided to call it a day. Every now and again it was nice to finish on time and spend the evening relaxing at home. Lache’s wife had said she’d be coming home early too.

Just as he was putting the service bell in the middle of the counter, Lache paused at the sight outside the window.

“Oh my...”

There was a man and a woman standing at the entrance. Alec and Shiori. It seemed they’d returned from work. Some sort of incident had taken place in the area they’d been in, and Lache himself had seen several adventurers from the apartment block hurriedly rush out to provide aid. He also knew that Alec and Shiori had gotten mixed up in it all.

“Glad to see you both back,” he murmured, though he knew neither could hear him.

Then he saw Alec kiss Shiori’s hand.

“Oh me, oh my.”

Lache suddenly found himself drawn in as he looked on. Alec and Shiori looked at each other as they spoke, and then Alec’s hand touched Shiori’s cheek.

“Oh me, oh my, oh goodness.”

Alec leaned down and as his face drew nearer to Shiori’s, his lips placed themselves...on her own.

“Oh me, oh my, oh goodness gracious me...”

Sptch.

Just as their lips touched, Lache heard a sticky, watery sound and found that his gaze was suddenly dyed blue. He leaned back in shock, and upon closer inspection, realized that the window panes were covered by a lapis-colored slime.

“Rurii...”

With the slime’s body covering the window, the sight which lay beyond it had become blurry and unclear. There was absolutely no doubt—the slime was protecting a moment of privacy.

“Loyal to your master, I must say...” muttered Lache, half in shock and half in admiration.

When the slime finally slid from the window, Lache stared out the now-clear glass to find that Alec was already leaving. A short while later, Shiori and Rurii both entered the apartment building.

“I’m finally home, Lache,” she said.

“Welcome home, Miss Shiori. You’ve been hard at work, I hear. Talk is going around about some kind of incident.”

“Yes. It was quite the ordeal. I’m quite exhausted by it all. I’ll be taking a break for the next few days.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Rest is a part of your work, after all.”

Shiori smiled with a slightly pained expression, as if the words brought back prickly memories.

“Indeed it is,” she said. “Have a good night.”

Lache watched Shiori walk up the stairs towards her room, then cast his gaze back out the window. He thought of Alec, who had likely returned to his lodgings not far from this very apartment. He thought of the expression on Alec’s face as he’d kissed Shiori. It was a kind, gentle smile. The man had had anything but a life of happiness, and Lache knew well how much of a salvation being with this woman would have felt like to him.

His eyes narrowed as he looked at the gorgeous city streets, all done up for the Nativity Festival.

“I’m so happy for you, Your Highness,” he said. His lips arched to

form a kind smile.

His name was Lache Lexell—apartment caretaker, and support personnel for the Royal Knights' Intelligence Division.

2

Alec had the landlady warm some water, then washed the grime from his body. Afterwards, he collapsed into a simple chair in his own room with a sigh of relief. He put the snacks he'd bought from the food stalls on the table, still in their wrappers, then had some ale together with some of the cheese and crackers that had been in his room before he'd left.

It was all flavorless.

He'd tasted the warm care and consideration in everything he'd eaten while he was away. Now that he'd gotten used to that, ready-made meals felt entirely lacking. It was the first time he'd felt like this. Before, he'd never felt one way or the other about eating on his own, or eating cold, tasteless food. He'd thought that this was how it always would be.

Until I met Shiori.

Now he knew the joy of eating carefully prepared food, with one he cared for deeply.

No—"knew" wasn't the right word. It was a joy he *remembered*. A joy that had grown distant over the years as the memory of his mother faded.

"Alec! There's a visitor for you!"

The knock interrupted his hazy, wandering thoughts, and he heard the voice of the landlady. She opened the door with a smile and behind her stood Zack, who waved a hand.

"If you're up late, just remember to lock the main doors at the entrance," said the landlady as she left.

Everyone in the lodging had a key to the main doors, as there were many times when people returned after the landlady had retired for the evening.

"Doesn't look half bad," said Zack. "No complaints, then?"

Alec's lodgings were a simple affair where each floor was essentially its own home, with a main entrance in the front on the first floor. To get to any of the rooms you had to go through the first floor, which was where the landlady lived, so people bumped into her often. Some of the lodgers found this more annoying than others.

"This was the only place that could get the contract done quickly. There's food if I ask for it too. I can't complain."

Alec had been gone for years, on an infiltration mission in the Empire. During that time, the contract on his old place had expired.

He'd wanted nothing more than a comfortable place to stay upon his return, and quickly settled on this lodging, not far from the Guild itself. He had a private room in the castle too, but he was never comfortable there and, besides, as far as the public was concerned, he had disappeared.

"I could have found you a place if you'd asked," said Zack. "You could have stayed with me, even. I've got a spare room."

"Sure. If it gets too much to deal with, I'll be in touch."

Alec gestured for Zack to take a seat. Zack took off his coat and leaned a courier bag—probably full of unfinished work—against the table leg. Then he sat down and opened up a paper bag he'd brought with him. Just as Alec thought, the bag held food from the stalls out in the streets.

Alec poured the ale and they clinked glasses.

"Well, first things first—here's to surviving that incident," said Zack, gulping down his glass of ale in one straight shot before pouring himself another.

"The trip to Rurii's home went swimmingly."

"Then you saw all of *them*, eh?"

Alec chuckled. He knew what Zack was getting at.

"That I did. Quite the spectacle. Feel like I've met enough slimes for an entire lifetime."

"You and me both. An ocean of crawling slimes... Can't think of much that's creepier."

"Shiori watched them while we ate."

"Ngh!"

Zack let out a truncated grunt, perhaps remembering the sight himself. Alec felt somewhat reassured by this—like what he'd felt when he'd seen them was normal, after all. Watching Shiori so casually interacting with an ocean of creepy slimes, he'd wondered if perhaps *he* was the weird one.

For a time they ate, drank, and talked casually. Then Zack's face turned serious.

"And what about Shiori's injury?" he asked.

"I didn't see it myself, so I can only tell you what I heard," said Alec. "She got into an argument with some of the suspects about how to handle the caravans."

"Caravans?"

"They were carrying female snow wolves. All of them pregnant, apparently. Some noble or another wanted pelts and pets. Though it's possible that isn't the real reason."

It could be that the pelts were for armor, and the "pets" were to be trained to follow orders—to be biological weapons, of a sort. There were those who suspected that some kind of scheme was at play.

“The snow wolves attacked because they wanted to take back their pregnant mates. Once they’d found them, they left peacefully. But the village suffered some bad damage up till that point.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Shiori, she...” Alec paused to wet his throat with a mouthful of ale. Zack lifted his head to listen. “The people that attacked Shiori wanted her to lift the carriage to protect the pregnant snow wolves. She refused, and they came at her...with a lash.”

Zack’s eyes grew wide, and his face contorted.

“That’s low. Those scum.”

“It was a horrible mark they left too.”

The mark had been a bruise like what he’d seen on slaves in the Empire. It came from blows thrown with all one’s might. It was shocking to think the merchants would so brazenly get in the way of people trying to provide aid—and attack a woman with a lash to boot. They had assaulted Shiori in a public place—not only were there witnesses, but some of them were knights. The merchants were either completely stupid, or they had a powerful-enough benefactor that even the knights didn’t frighten them.

“Fortunately, Ellen was able to heal her completely. But,” Alec said, looking at Zack and staring into his blue eyes, “the other scars on her arms and legs—they’re beyond healing.”

A heavy silence fell between them. Zack’s expression went blank. There was no way to know what he was feeling. But as the light of the magic lanterns cast a strange, otherworldly glow into his blue eyes, they wavered slightly.

“The knights who saw to Shiori’s injuries thought I was the one who did it,” Alec said.

“They interviewed her, though it wasn’t anything official. She might have said some things you still haven’t heard. The knights said they would send over a copy of their report before the end of the year.”

“I see. I’ll be sure to keep it somewhere safe.”

For a time, Alec and Zack didn’t speak at all—there was only the quiet sound of two men sipping ale and placing their cups back on the table. Eventually Alec spoke.

“Those scars were used to control and intimidate her. They’re the reason she never told anyone what was going on, and they’re the reason she wouldn’t rely on anyone. Even before that, some girls whispered rumors in her ear because they were jealous, all to separate her from you and the others. But the scars were what really did it. She’d finally found somewhere she thought she belonged, and she was so scared of losing it that she couldn’t speak out—couldn’t do anything.”

Zack said nothing. He made no move to touch his ale, and merely stared into space.

“Her heart is still filled with that same fear,” said Alec. “She went into a panic and even tried to refuse medical treatment just because she couldn’t bear the idea of people finding out about her scars. They had to sedate her. She was in tears, begging and pleading. ‘Don’t abandon me,’ she said...”

Alec would never forget her face, red from tears as she slept. So tormented that it was all he could do to wrap her in his arms in an attempt to soothe her.

“Zack... Is there really *nothing* we can do when a woman gets pushed *that* far? Ranvald, Akatsuki—right now they’re all just free as birds—”

“Alec,” said Zack, breaking his silence. A strange light rose in his eyes. “Do you really think I sat back and did nothing?”

A terrifying smile had appeared on Zack’s face. It was a smile Alec had only seen a few times—a smile that pierced through those who saw it.

“I am not so good-natured, nor such a coward, that I would sit back and do nothing when the woman I loved was hurt.” Zack reached down for the bag he’d brought with him and passed the documents inside to Alec.

“Ranvald Lumbeck, death from unnatural causes. Ivar Leijon, Sven Rosén, Rachel Skantze, deceased. Bart Ahnsjo, whereabouts unknown. Torre Blomberg, excommunicated... This is...”

It was an investigation into individuals related to a particular incident. And Alec knew exactly who the names belonged to the moment he read the first two names on the list. Every name belonged to a person who had abused and used Shiori, and then tried to kill her.

Ranvald Lumbeck was the former guild master of the Tris branch of the Adventurers’ Guild. He’d been removed from his post when it was revealed he was involved in the incident, and Alec thought he was currently in retirement. Alec also recognized Rachel’s name in the list, as she was someone Shiori had mentioned. He remembered hearing that she died soon after Akatsuki disbanded.

“So in the end, she wouldn’t tell me what had happened...but she did tell you,” said Zack.

“Yes.”

“And it was just as I thought,” muttered Zack. He motioned for Alec to read on.

Most of the people on the list were dead. What did it mean? And what was the story behind Ranvald’s apparent death from unnatural causes?

“That party, it hit rock bottom. I didn’t have to do a thing—they

destroyed themselves. Not long after the incident with Shiori, Rachel took a request and just like that, she was gone. As for Ivar and Sven, they died exploring some ruins. The official report says it was magical beasts, but the reality is that they had a falling-out and killed each other. Bart's body was never recovered, but according to reports from the scene, there was no way he could have survived. Eaten by magical beasts, most likely. Torre is the lone survivor, but he was expelled after some kind of trouble at the place he relocated to. He's got no money and he can't go home—from what I hear he's just another piece of gutter trash, now."

Zack went on without emotion, detailing the end of the party.

"The only thing that kept them in harmony was the bullying and the abuse. They squeezed her for everything she had, they scarred her, and then when they were done they tried to throw her away like trash."

Without the remarkable coincidence that was Rurii, Shiori would have died, and her body would have been lost forever. The thought sent a shiver down Alec's spine.

"Zack, why in the world would you leave her in the care of a party like that? Didn't anybody know they were so rotten?"

It was something he had wondered for a long time. Why had Zack left the woman he loved to those people? Clemens, Nadia—did nobody say anything? In response, Zack could only muster a wry grin.

"They weren't so bad to begin with. They had a good reputation. They were rough around the edges, but they were working at it little by little. They were making a go of it in the best way they could. Their ages and ranks weren't so different from Shiori's, and they seemed like good people. I thought they'd be good for each other. But..." Zack's hand balled into a fist. "Ranvald started putting things into their heads...that piece of shit. He knew they were hungry for promotion and he used that—he encouraged them to treat Shiori the way he wanted by promising them bonuses and better assessments. It was about money, and it was about her body."

"Money...and he wanted Shiori's body?"

Alec could not ignore these words—they made his entire being tense up. Zack placed another sheaf of documents in front of him. On the very top was a newspaper. The Tris Times, dated some three years ago. A corner of the local news section was circled in red ink.

"The high-class brothel, the Canary's Dream, was subjected to a compulsory investigation... The female manager, staff, and select clientele were arrested, and multiple immigrant women who were imprisoned and forced into prostitution have been taken into custody. The owner of the establishment remains unknown..."

The key words of the article all resonated with a story Alec had

heard not so long ago. Brothels. Immigrant women. Forced against their will... The thought made him physically ill.

Zack watched him silently, then put the newspaper to the side and pointed to the remaining documents. They were copies of detailed recordings of the incident—confidential documents, ordinarily kept secure within their respective divisions.

Alec looked through the particulars—the depositions of the manager and various staff members who were arrested, statements from the women who were taken into custody, medical reports—and he let out a low groan. He felt even more sick.

The newspaper article had been strangely concise, and he now knew it was because the incident was a truly cruel and horrible affair, and because certain truths needed to be hidden—specifically those of a political nature. The clientele arrested included important government officials, high-ranking knights, well-known noblemen, and various people of importance from allied nations.

But there were also details in the case files that caused Alec to frown—they gave him a sense of *déjà vu*.

Horrible scarring was found on the bodies of the victims. Some appeared to be branding scars, while others looked to be caused by magical beasts. The women had panicked during treatment, terrified of their scars being seen. Many of these women had to be sedated so treatment could continue.

Just like Shiori.

Alec closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh, then returned to the documents. On the face of it, the Canary's Dream was an exclusive members-only gentlemen's club where distinguished men could meet well-educated high-class prostitutes. Behind the scenes, however, naive young girls and immigrant women were tricked or kidnapped, imprisoned, then forced into prostitution. They were also made to be "playthings," a euphemism for cruel torture at the hands of some of these supposed gentlemen.

These women were intimidated and bullied through scarring, which was used as an invisible ball and chain in combination with outdated beliefs about scarred women. The majority of their earnings were taken from them in the form of fines or expenses. Psychologically and financially trapped, they were thus turned into products sold by a most terrifying business. There was no small number of women who were sacrificed in the name of "playing too much." At the time of the investigation, four bodies were found, but with the help of staff depositions, a further five bodies were found in a different location. This made a total of nine corpses.

In the beginning, the Canary's Dream was a legal brothel, and had received permission to conduct business from the local authorities. It

was a place where men could be entertained by women acting as upper-class ladies. However, during an outbreak of influenza, and in spite of treatment, the most popular hostesses and the brothel's rising stars began to die one after another. As a result, regulars distanced themselves from the place and business began to plummet.

It was at this point that ownership changed hands, and the remaining women were sold to the new owner. Then the illegal business began. For all intents and purposes, the Canary's Dream maintained its front as a high-class brothel. The vast majority of its customers were there for the legal entertainment. But the truth of the matter was, it was also a terrifying murder club where women's lives became playthings.

Everybody had their own reasons for keeping quiet. The hostesses were blinded by the potential for vast earnings, and fearful of being charged for suppression of evidence. Those who were members of the underground club didn't want to lose the one place where they could fulfill their perverted desires. So the Canary's Dream carried on unnoticed for some two years, and nothing ever leaked to the public—one reason for this being that a high-ranking knight who was a member of the brothel had been able to inform the manager in advance when inspections were scheduled.

The compulsory investigation began as a result of an anonymous source in the brothel blowing the whistle on what was going on. Usually, a compulsory investigation would have been preceded by an in-depth investigation during which evidence could be gathered and all known suspects rounded up, but the knights decided to move quickly, before they had actually uncovered the mastermind behind the operation. This was partially because of the nature of the torture, and especially because there was someone important among the brothel's regular customers—a diplomat from an allied nation. There was also the scandal concerning a secret agent who had been dispatched to aid in dismantling the Empire—they could not let other nations learn of this.

In the end, however, the man responsible for the business was not found, and even his identity remained entirely unknown. He had entered and left the premises in the guise of a customer, so not only did no one know his name, but none knew what he looked like either. On top of that, not long before the whistleblower came forward, he had stopped visiting the brothel entirely. The investigation was left at a dead end.

Though the manager—who was most closely in touch with the owner—was put through a thorough interrogation, no useful testimony came of it. She had been a hostess at the Canary's Dream until the man had paid for her freedom. This woman, who was made

manager when the brothel was purchased, was the anonymous informant. Her heart heavy with the crimes of her lover, she had made the decision to report both him and them, but the owner had sensed from her behavior that something was afoot. He'd taken the money from the sales and fled.

It was not the fact that the owner remained at large that reduced her to a weeping mess, but that he had hid his appearance from even her.

"The reason the woman decided to come forward," muttered Zack as Alec reached the end of all the papers, "was Shiori."

The food on the table had long since gone cold, but Alec no longer wanted to even touch it. He drank down his warm ale to try and keep the sickening feeling within him at bay, then looked at Zack, making no attempt to hide how mentally exhausting this all was for him. He motioned with his eyes for Zack to go on.

"Shiori was approached by one of the brothel's scouts. They probably spotted her because women from the east are so rare. Apparently the man was well-dressed and for all intents and purposes appeared to be quite the gentleman. Still, Shiori was a bit suspicious of him and she came to me about it. Told me it was an exclusive high-class customer service club. Exactly what you'd expect."

Zack took a sip from his ale before continuing.

"Apparently, when the manager was told to prepare for the arrival of an Eastern woman, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. If a rare woman like that was brought in, it'd bring in customers, sure—but she had no idea what they'd do to such a girl. She didn't know what else to do, so she went to the knights."

The weight of a heavy conscience. The need to stop the sins of her lover. Some might have heard that and felt sorry for the woman, but it had been two long years before she ever said a word, and in that time nine women had died. And that was only counting the bodies. Many, many more had been left to live with hearts and minds scarred beyond healing. The manager's role in all of this was no small thing, and though she had been forced to follow orders, she would not escape harsh punishment. She was given lifetime imprisonment.

Alec had arrived at the final document. The mastermind behind it all, the owner of the Canary's Dream—the man who had fled the scene, his identity unknown.

Ranvald Lumbeck. Death by unnatural causes.

"He was the one behind it all?"

Zack had said that Ranvald had taken an interest in Akatsuki for the money, but Alec still couldn't connect that with the image of one who owned and ran such an unnerving high-class brothel.

An image of Ranvald came to his mind. He was a high-level mage

in his fifties who had become guild master some years back. He was methodical and meticulous when it came to money, but he seemed well-suited to and good at his duties, and was quite amicable. He was rather well-regarded as a guild master. If there was anything about his character that could have been called into question, it was that he was a difficult man to know. He came from a well-to-do family, and dressed himself in the sort of nice clothes not often seen on adventurers. There was something odd about the way he dressed like a noble while living among common people, and perhaps there was something slightly suspect in the way he carried himself, but that was the extent of it.

However, the case of the Canary's Dream was uncannily similar to the treatment Shiori received at the hands of Akatsuki. Harming women for access to money, and turning them into mere dolls that followed orders.

"Was it Ranvald who sent the scout after Shiori?"

"It was."

"So he escaped capture by the knights, only to use his position as guild master to do it all over again with Shiori?"

"Indeed he did."

Using Akatsuki as a cover, Ranvald slowly sapped away at Shiori's heart, crushing it at the same time that he tinkered with everyone's requests to keep Shiori away from Zack and her other friends. The results spoke for themselves.

"It was because of what happened with Akatsuki that he finally left a trail. He messed up while trying to tie up loose ends."

They knew by the scars on Shiori's body. By the way she panicked and struggled and cried when they tried to treat her. She was just like the victims of the Canary's Dream. That was when Zack first realized that perhaps the two cases were related, and linked by the owner of the Canary's Dream, who was still at large.

"I was part of the investigation into the brothel in the first place. Kris asked me to help."

Kris—that is, Kristoffer—was margrave of the region, and an old friend of Zack's. Alec, too, had spent time under his care.

Among the list of the brothel's clients was a diplomat who was a marquis's heir, and a foreign ambassador believed to have helped with the dismantling of the Empire. Their visits to the brothel were labeled as either inspections or recuperative activities. It was also said that some women were "freed" and taken to these neighboring countries. With the case having now spread across borders, it was far too great a load for the margrave, and so the help of the kingdom and the Royal Knights was enlisted to conduct highly secretive negotiations with the related nations. Alec imagined it must have been quite the headache

for Olivier and Edvard too.

“What’s the story with Ranvald’s unnatural death, then?” asked Alec.

The official documentation stated that Ranvald’s corpse was found in the forest near Tris, and that his cause of death was deemed unnatural. He had been discovered a year and a half ago, just a few weeks after the Akatsuki incident. The report had concluded that after being attacked by bandits in the evening while in transit, his body had been ravaged by magical beasts, but...

Zack’s eyes met Alec’s. His usually bright blue eyes struck Alec as strangely muddled. It was a complicated gaze, wrapped in self-blame, self-hate, and ferocity.

“The real reason everything could be wrapped up so simply with Ranvald’s dismissal as guild leader was because of pressure on the Guild, due to the political issues at play. There was no way the kingdom could let its neighbors know about a scandal of this nature, where Ranvald’s business allowed for an important diplomat between our country and another to essentially play at murder.”

They wanted to avoid a situation where, however improbable, a link between the Canary’s Dream incident and the Akatsuki incident could be made. What happened was thus summarily crushed so as not to bring the bigger incident to light. On the surface, Ranvald was simply dismissed for what he’d allowed to happen, and met an unfortunate fate at the hands of bandits while returning to his hometown.

“I took care of him,” said Zack with a sneer.

3

One and a half years ago, on the night that it happened:

A narrow forest path was blanketed in the darkness of night. The evening sky was scattered with ominous clouds, and the moon looked like the blade of the grim reaper, casting a dull light over the land below.

It was completely silent—save for the occasional call of a nocturnal bird or insect—as Ranvald ran for dear life. The lights of the city could not reach him here, and he sped through the darkness by the light of a small magic lamp.

He had made a grave mistake. He had given into his greed, and in trying to get free, he had made a misstep.

She was a rare Eastern woman. With her smooth lustrous skin, youthful face, and silky black hair, she would have made a fine piece of merchandise even being past her prime. Her gentle, delicate body was like that of a young girl, and uncommon among Storydian

women. That she had a fleeting pure innocence to her, like a nun, would have excited in men both a desire to protect and a desire to violate. With a woman like her on the menu, Ranvald would have been inundated with requests from the clientele.

He had put into plan attempts to make her his own, but he'd stumbled. He made not one, but two dire mistakes. Also, if only once, he should have had her for himself... It was all too regrettable.

Ranvald ground his teeth. The first mistake had indeed been a painful one. He had noticed in time and had managed to escape with the money they'd earned, but he'd been betrayed by the brothel's own manager. She had exposed their business.

The incident was in the news, but what happened immediately after was kept entirely hidden from the public. It was for this reason he did not know what fate had befallen the manager or the brothel's other staff. But he could easily imagine that they would not be let off lightly. Two of their best customers were already dead, according to the newspaper obituary column. One, a foreign ambassador, had suffered "a sudden death from food poisoning," while the other, a diplomat who organized and hosted events, had "died while recovering from a sudden illness." The deaths were, essentially, executions of a sort.

And if Ranvald himself were caught, he would not escape the harshest of punishments. He had been right to play things carefully, to have committed to hiding his appearance with illusion magic. He had continued working at the Adventurers' Guild as normal, but in his heart he was filled with fear. Fortunately, the investigation never reached as far as the Guild—he had evaded capture.

However...

"Damn it all!" he spat.

He shouldn't have made the second mistake, and yet it had happened as he tried to tie up loose ends. When interest in the case looked to be winding down, Ranvald had once more tried to make the woman his own. But again, he had failed. Before he could sell her as a slave to the Empire, he had tried to squeeze her for everything she was worth, and it had backfired. What he'd thought was the perfect timing for getting rid of her was, in fact, far too late.

The worst of it was that the woman's guarantor, Zack, had caught wind that something was afoot. He was an S-rank adventurer with a sprawling network of connections. He also had the favor of many upper-class nobles. Ranvald knew the man was dangerous, and had tried to keep him at a distance, but before he had even realized it Zack was investigating his crimes. He had panicked and ordered Akatsuki to dispose of the woman, but they had failed. Everything had gone according to plan until they'd come back and revealed they were

unable to strike the killing blow. But even then she should have died.

“She should never have survived...”

For reasons he could not fathom, a slime that had taken a liking to the woman had brought her all the way back to town. And of course, they would have thoroughly examined her at the medical clinic. They would have seen her scars, and how unnatural they were. They would have understood how she was abused—not allowed to live, yet not allowed to die—and bore witness to the scars that would never heal as long as she lived. The scars covering her arms and her legs.

All the same, Ranvald had been prepared. He had used Akatsuki to do his work, knowing that he could not be tried for the abuse the woman had received. But if word of those scars reached the knights, he knew that someone would connect them to the Canary’s Dream.

He had wanted to flee, but until he had received orders from the Guild Headquarters, he had felt someone keeping an eye on him. When he returned home, too, he felt certain he was being watched. Most likely it was Zack. Ranvald had lost his authority as guild master, and spent the days executing dull duties as he waited for an opportunity to escape.

He had waited several weeks and finally, today, the opportunity had presented itself. The Guild had been flooded by a variety of requests, far more than usual, and all its key adventurers were out working. Perhaps because of this, the eyes he constantly felt on him had also seemingly vanished.

There wouldn’t be a more perfect time. Ranvald quickly left and hurried home. Whoever it was who’d been watching him, they were not doing so now. He gathered together his savings and valuables, changed into traveling clothes, and fled. He cast illusion magic as he walked, subtly shifting his appearance little by little, until he looked like an entirely different person. Then he inserted himself into a group of travelers to pass through the kingdom’s gates.

His plan was to get as far as possible. He could no longer stay in the country. He had to get past the borders and—

Rustle.

Ranvald stopped. He sensed that something had changed. It was the hint of murder—a disconcerting, piercing sensation. He could feel it drawing close from behind, heading straight for him. Then he heard footsteps—not those of a magical beast, but human footsteps.

Someone’s tailing me!

His mind screamed that he had to run, but a deathly glare had him locked in place and unable to move. Now Ranvald knew that the thing was after him. And finally, it appeared before his eyes—a man dressed in black.

“Who are you?” Ranvald demanded.

It took all his energy to spit the words. His voice felt ragged. They would think him scared. The man in black, all but his mouth hidden by his hood, let a twisted grin grow upon his lips.

"I've worked for you all these years, and you don't even know who I am. How cruel of you, Ranvald. And to think I did the best I could to contribute to the Guild's name."

The voice was one Ranvald recognized, and it made his body tense. The man removed his hood, and in the dim light of the magical lamp he made out a familiar head of red hair.

"Zack Ciel..."

Zack's face, usually home to a friendly smile, was now filled with danger as he glared. It made clear the reason he had come.

Revenge.

Ranvald had given up on the illusion magic facade, and stood before Zack in his original form. It was pointless to hide now.

"What do you want?" Ranvald asked. "I already assigned you work. You should be doing it. Why are you here?"

It was a sudden request of an especially high difficulty. A request that would have been near impossible for anyone other than an S-ranker. Zack had been assigned and dispatched. Unless he had abandoned the request, there was no reason for him to be here now. He demanded that Zack tell him if he'd abandoned the request purely for revenge. Zack, however, was not intimidated.

"Ah, the request," he said. "It was a fake. I had a friend create that for me. I had them create a series of emergency requests, in fact, so I could catch you off guard. Looks like it worked swimmingly."

"What...?"

It had been a trap. Ranvald ground his teeth in frustration, but there was nothing he could do about it now. The more important task at hand was finding a way to escape. Zack was S-rank. Ranvald was A. However, there was a chance he could keep a safe distance with his magic, and hide himself with illusions. Zack was a swordsman—the man did not know magic. Ranvald knew he could do it—he *had* to do it, for the alternative was his demise.

"I will tell you now that even if you kill me, you won't escape," said Zack. "You're surrounded."

"What?! That's impossible! I can't sense anything—"

"They're very good at hiding. You never had a chance of sensing them."

Zack was belittling him, and Ranvald felt the blood rush to his head.

"Bastard!" he shouted. "Lowly, arrogant filth! I was born into the family of a viscount! Do not even dream of taking that tone with me!"

Ranvald disguised himself as an adventurer, but in fact he was a

noble. Zack did not care, though. He laughed at Ranvald.

“If you’re going to try and pull rank on me, then I get to brag too.”

“What did you say...?”

“You’re not the only one of noble birth. Shall I regale you with my real name, Ranvald Norstedt?”

Ranvald’s breath caught in his throat.

Norstedt.

It was a name he had thrown away more than twenty years ago. No, it was a name he was *made* to abandon...

“Your family didn’t approve of your marriage to your assistant, so you stole the fortune and ran. If it was just an elopement they might have forgiven you, but stealing the family fortune put you in a bad spot. One of the things you stole was a gift from the past emperor, wasn’t it? And it got you disowned, yes?”

“H-How...?”

...did you know?

Ranvald had wanted to speak the words, but they had disappeared from his lips. Sweat beaded uncomfortably on his back.

“Lumbeck is your mother’s family name. If you were going to change your surname, you should have changed your first name too. Ranvald isn’t a common name in the Tris area, but you hear it much more in the royal capital. And there are only two Lumbeck family lines in the capital—it was all too easy to sift through the fifty or so Ranvalds to find the one I was looking for.”

Ranvald wanted to take a step back, create some space, but his body would not listen to him. He shifted only slightly.

“What happened to her, then?” asked Zack. “What happened to the girl you ran away with?”

“She’s gone. She was gone when the money was gone.”

His legs wouldn’t listen to him, but all the same, as soon as that woman from his past was mentioned, Ranvald’s head suddenly cleared.

He hadn’t known it at the time because he’d been head over heels in love, but he knew it now. She had only wanted his name, and only wanted his money. She was the illegitimate child of a certain family, and so she admired the lifestyles of the upper-class nobles. It was obvious in every word she spoke, but Ranvald had never seen it at the time. It was only when they’d run completely out of money, when the only thing left was working for a living, that he realized.

One day, he woke up in the morning and she had vanished. She had taken the treasured jewels he had not wanted to part with even when their reserves were running on empty, and just like that, she was gone. That she had left him just enough money to survive for the

immediate future was, perhaps, a sign of the love she had once felt for him.

When he looked into her whereabouts, he knew only that she had found a new man, a foreigner, and she had left the country with him. Ranvald lacked the money to go after her, so he'd stayed where he was, in the city of Tris, and taken up adventuring. It had led him to this moment.

From the beginning, he had always been talented when it came to magic, and so he began work as a mage, earning quite the name for himself. At around forty he became less active in the field, but several of his books had been picked up by the Guild as instruction manuals, and as a result he had been selected to fill the then-empty position of guild master at the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild.

Though he'd met other women, the memory of the one who abandoned him clung tight to his soul and would not let go, and he felt no desire for another serious relationship.

Though he sometimes went to the pleasure district to purchase particular services, he had entered the Canary's Dream on a whim. It was there that he met, quite by coincidence, a prostitute who looked just like the woman who had abandoned him. It was only after visiting this woman several times that he realized he had not completely abandoned his feelings for women.

"So what?" said Zack, his words full of disgust. "You bought the whole brothel because of that one woman?"

Ranvald sneered in reply.

"No," he said.

"Then why?!"

"It was revenge. Revenge against the woman who left me."

He had loved her. He'd loved her so much so that he had thrown away his very ancestry and position just to be with her. When he had stolen the family riches, it was because she had wanted a life of freedom. He had thrown away his reputation, his future, and given everything for her, but as far as she was concerned, no money equaled no relationship. She had disappeared the moment the money had run dry. She took the jewel he had bought for her and fled to another country with another man.

Some ten years of his youth had gone by, carrying those bitter memories in his heart, and then he had happened upon a high-class brothel and a prostitute who was the spitting image of his past love.

It was then, as he saw her more regularly, that Ranvald had realized something.

He wanted to hurt this woman. He wanted to see her bullied, abused, and made weak before him. Those dark, twisted feelings had settled in his heart because he could not forget her—the woman who

abandoned him—and at some point that love he once felt had turned to hate.

This was revenge. This was a chance, given to him, to enact vengeance. She was a substitute for *her*, so that he might have his retribution. The feelings in his heart had hardened into resolution.

“Some day, I will buy your freedom,” he had said, “and then we shall be together.”

It was the last day he had ever appeared before the prostitute as Ranvald. He had whispered the message in her ear, and she had smiled with such joy. She pined for him. But he had stopped visiting her, just like that, and only weeks later did he appear again, hidden behind illusion magic as an all-new customer. He asked for her by name, and he had seen her—seen her gaunt and burdened with the knowledge that the man who had made her a promise had so callously thrown her away. He had seen her, and something in the depths of his heart had felt fulfilled.

He had found it—the very face, the very expression, he had longed to see.

It was the moment his sadism had manifested.

To wear the face of a lover. To treat her like she was special. To whisper at all the right times, “One day I will make you free. I will get the money and I promise you that someday I will be back. Until then, you must wait for me.”

Someday. There was no promise more vague and uncertain than in that very word. And it was for this very reason that she had rejoiced, but then, with time, felt uncertainty about the day she hoped would come. A few years after that promise he had returned, and though she was still, quite admirably, waiting, she had also grown exhausted. The sight had brought with it a quiet, dark, and addictive joy.

One year, when the flu had killed off the brothel’s most popular girls along with more than half the others, the brothel had been left with almost nothing. Its regular clientele had all but abandoned it.

But for Ranvald, it was a golden opportunity. Both the brothel, and the fact that the woman, forever waiting, had survived.

Because so many had died of infectious diseases, the property was near untouchable, and Ranvald had purchased it and the remaining prostitutes at prices that were a steal. He made the woman the new manager. He had assigned her a “butler,” but this individual was in fact there to keep tabs on her. A watchdog. She sometimes went out for walks or to go shopping, but for the most part she stayed cooped up in the brothel.

The woman had finally arrived at a point where she no longer had to serve customers, and yet because she had not attained freedom in

the way she had envisioned it, she was in no small part disheartened. Still, Ranvald was worried about the idea of letting her out into the world, so he'd told her that she'd been in the brothel far too long to understand the world outside of it, and she had meekly obeyed.

She was a bird in a cage. A canary that sang only for him.

It buried the scars in his heart to see the feelings of a woman sway like a pendulum at each one of his words. It was that dark joy filling his heart.

At one point, a regular client had gone too far in his "play" and killed a prostitute. The client and the girl had met numerous times, but this was the first time the girl had allowed him into the bedroom, and on that very night she was killed. The bruises and scars on the corpse made it all too easy to surmise what had happened.

The client was a sadist.

The manager had gone pale, and she was lost to hesitation, and the mix of feelings he saw in her expression—the despair, the sorrow, the defeat—all of it had filled him with a most terrible satisfaction.

This is what I longed for.

And he wanted more of it. The look of anguish on her face at hitting rock bottom, the sheer despair of betrayal—it would quench his desires for revenge and sadism.

The man had thrust an exorbitant sum on Ranvald as hush money, and Ranvald took it without question. He sent the man home and had the body discreetly taken care of. The women who were involved in the incident were given bonuses, and told in no uncertain terms that they were now accomplices. Their lips were thus sealed tight.

It was because of this incident that the brothel added an "underground" element to its services. Likely candidates among the clientele were contacted in secret, where they became underground members. And the new services were a hit. The new members loved having a place to fulfill their twisted sexual desires, and before long they brought friends with similar predilections who also became regulars. They did not visit often, but when they did, they paid handsomely. As the membership of the underground club grew, the brothel saw profits more than twenty times what it used to.

And all of it to see the torture on *her* face. Each time a girl died, each time a corpse was disposed of, each time a new girl was brought in to replace an old one, and each time their flesh was scarred to keep them from escaping—there was no greater joy for Ranvald than to see *her* grow ever more haggard.

After two years of running the underground business, the woman had become little more than an emotionless, living doll. And it was for this reason that Ranvald had underestimated her. He had never imagined that she would secretly conspire with the very butler he'd

assigned to her, and report the brothel to the knights.

He had not imagined she would have the strength of will for such an act.

But Ranvald had felt the change in the air, imperceptibly. The last time he had visited the brothel, there had been something strange about the woman, and it had left him with an ominous feeling. He gave her and the butler their orders, then took the brothel's earnings and fled.

Immediately afterwards, the knights were delivered an anonymous report from a whistleblower.

"No woman can ever be trusted," said Ranvald to Zack. "They betray their men so easily. That's why this is punishment as much as it is revenge."

He spoke of it all so eloquently, but there was a warped and perverted joy in his eyes. Up till this point Zack had been listening silently, but disgust burned in his heart, and he let out a low growl.

"Revenge? None of what you did was revenge. All of it was a disgusting game to satiate your twisted sexual desires."

The way he'd looked when he'd talked about scarring women's bodies... There was no mistaking the sadistic joy that crossed Ranvald's face. It was an extreme draw to sadism—it was a sickness. As the owner of that business, he was a sadist, taking a twisted enjoyment from the women he abused.

Zack did not know if Ranvald had been born with it, or if it was something that had smoldered and twisted his heart after the betrayal, but he knew that he himself was enraged—furious to realize he'd been so oblivious that a man this dangerous had been right there in front of him.

"It wasn't just the money that made you target Shiori," Zack said. "You took joy in watching her being bullied, didn't you? You liked watching her wilt."

"I needed the money. Everything in this world requires funding. But I will not deny that I enjoyed it. She is a beautiful woman. To see such a pure young lady grow weak, pale, and gaunt... Oh, how it excited me. I only regret that I could do none of it with my own hands."

"You lowly piece of shit."

The joy on Ranvald's face twisted at Zack's words.

"How many times must I remind you to watch your tone of voice, peasant? I am a viscount's son."

"Then how about I remind you that if you're going to pull rank, I'm going to follow suit?"

"What?"

"Let me tell you who I really am," said Zack. He took a step

forward, and Ranvald, overwhelmed, took a step back. “I am Bleyzac. Bleyzac Fauchelle.”



“Bleyzac...? Fauchelle?” Ranvald’s eyes narrowed in thought, but in the next instant they grew wide with shock—he had realized what that name meant. “The distinguished military nobles...the family name of the duke...”

“Correct.”

Ranvald gasped.

“Impossible!” he spat, fighting to keep from trembling. “There is nobody like you in the Fauchelle family...and the lord is already... No, wait. You’re...”

He swallowed hard before speaking again.

“You’re the missing heir...”

“Is that what they’re calling me now?” Zack laughed. “I couldn’t stand all the commotion, so I left. I won’t deny that. But I made sure the family knew, and I left on good terms. I’m still part of the family register...unlike you.”

“What did you just say?”

“We investigated the Norstedt family as part of this incident. They’re court nobles who’ve provided generations of civil servants. We needed to know if they were receiving any profits from the Canary’s Dream. Fortunately, they were in the clear—it would have been a hell of a mess to deal with otherwise. And your older brother? He was beside himself.”

Zack took a sealed letter from his pocket and thrust it at Ranvald. Ranvald stared at it for a moment before snatching it and tearing it open. As he came to understand the weight of its contents, his body began to tremble.

“What...what is this?” he said. He was looking at a copy of the official Norstedt lineage. “I’m...I’m not here.”

If he had been disowned, there would have been a diagonal strike through his name, but on this document his name was entirely missing—as if he had never existed in the first place.

“That whole incident with the Canary’s Dream...it involved high-ranking officials and foreign ambassadors. Taking care of it caused his highness and the margrave a real headache, not to mention quite the quarrel with the allied nations in question. And when your brother found out that his own disowned brother was the mastermind behind the whole thing? His rage was truly a sight to behold.”

Because Ranvald’s family was involved in politics, they could not easily extricate themselves from a situation in which a relative was the ringleader of a crime that crossed borders. As such, this was the offer made to the Norstedt family—they would not be made to take any responsibility for what had occurred, but only on the condition that they never speak about the incident, and that Ranvald’s fate

would be left entirely to Zack's discretion. That fate was thus: his deletion from the family register, and capital punishment. In other words, Ranvald was not merely removed from the register, he was wiped from it entirely—for all intents and purposes, he no longer existed.

The Norstedt viscount agreed to the terms immediately. Not only had the family as a whole escaped punishment, they were now free of the one person who could still sully their family's reputation.

"Now that you no longer exist, you are guilty of faking noble identification *and* committing heinous crimes."

"You bastard!"

Enraged, Ranvald cast a high-level fireball spell that required no incantation whatsoever. Zack evaded it easily, and the sounds of dissipating flames rang out into the forest—it was Zack's hidden crew, neutralizing Ranvald's spell.

Ranvald readied himself to cast another spell, but Zack closed the distance between them in an instant, and sliced Ranvald's hand off with one swift swing of his blade. A scream echoed through the forest.

"Do you have any idea how hard Shiori worked, crawling up from absolutely nothing, working herself to the bone just to make a living? And that woman you used for your revenge—just a few more years and she would have been free. Not to mention all the girls that were killed... Girls who had come here to work so they could send money back to their families. One of those girls was even engaged."

Ranvald writhed on the ground, clutching his severed wrist. Zack stared down at him mercilessly.

"All of them did the very best they could for their families and for their own futures."

Zack readied his sword once more. Ranvald was in agony, and he screamed as he tried to crawl away, trailing blood behind him.

"But you took all of that away from them. You destroyed what they had, all to satisfy your perverted urges and your twisted sense of revenge. The woman you tortured will spend life in prison, but she's a husk of a person and she doesn't have long left. Nobody knows if Shiori will ever recover. You took everything from her. Her money, her hope, her future. Her dignity. *Everything*."

He'd done the same to Akatsuki. They weren't bad in the beginning. And Zack knew many who'd gotten on well with them. If Ranvald hadn't drawn them onto his twisted path, there was every chance that Shiori would be doing well with them. Even if each of them had started out with a seed of darkness deep in their hearts that they didn't know about, those seeds never would have sprouted if not for the whims of the monster that nurtured them. The members of Akatsuki may well have lived the rest of their lives as upstanding

citizens.

By the time Shiori was brought back into Zack's care, however, a member of Akatsuki had already died. A woman named Rachel, who had enjoyed Shiori's company when she first joined the party. Zack remembered watching the two women, huddled in a corner of the Guild and giggling as they shared secrets. But she had been pulled down a dark path, and as a result of her own shame at the bullying she'd enacted, she was dead. The future was not bright for the remaining members either. They had given into temptation and no longer knew how to get back to the path they had once walked. The dark decay in their eyes was all too vivid.

Zack slowly raised his blade.

"You will die," he said, "and your sentence will be carried out right here, right now. As for your trial... You can attend that in the depths of hell."

Ranvald no longer had a voice for his words. He merely stared at the tip of the sword as Zack brought it down upon him, his face blank. The sword came down again, and again.

Eleven times, in total.

"Bleyzac."

As Zack stood before the dead body, Kristoffer called to him, emerging from the bushes. He wore the same black robe as his men—the same black robe as Zack.

"Don't you think that's enough?"

Ranvald's dead body was soaked in a pool of his own blood.

"This is me holding back," said Zack, raising his eyes slowly from the corpse. "All I really wanted was to cut him once for each of the victims."

For Shiori, for the manager that Ranvald had used, and for the women who had lost their lives to his whims. Eleven in total. If he were to include every victim, however, the total would easily exceed twenty.

"Any more than this and we won't be able to cover up the corpse. Look, I understand your feelings...really, I do. He did some truly horrible things."

Zack shook the blood from his sword and slid it back into its sheath. He let out a deep sigh.

"I'm sorry. I asked for too much."

"Think nothing of it."

Ranvald's punishment by my own hand—that was what Zack had asked for when they had confirmed Ranvald's guilt, and when all that was left was to arrest him. He was the mastermind behind an incident that could never be made public, the details of which would never see

the light of day. All that was left was for him to be arrested in secret, then summarily executed.

And if Ranvald was to receive his punishment—his death—in secrecy, then Zack wanted to be the one to mete it out. The matter of the duke's heir and the foreign ambassador had been taken care of without the need for an official execution—and so he had wanted to punish Ranvald himself.

Kristoffer had not approved of the plan at first, and naturally, under normal circumstances, such requests were not permitted. However, it was because of Zack's work that they had solved the case. Until he had found the right thread to unravel it all, they had been lost in a maze, their key culprit shrouded in mystery. With the help of the duke's family, they were able to investigate Ranvald's past and his crimes in a very short period of time. It was also largely thanks to Zack's work that negotiations with the Norstedts ended without anything reaching the public's ears.

It was for this reason that Kristoffer had, in the end, acquiesced to Zack's demand. The king, too, gave his permission. "*He may do as he wishes,*" were His Majesty's words.

"It all backfired on that man when he took his eyes off the 'celestial maiden.' It is a sad, cruel thing to think that she got wrapped up in all of this," muttered Kristoffer. "We'll have to enforce stronger regulations in the pleasure district."

He put a gentle hand upon Zack's shoulder.

"Allow us to take care of the rest, Zack. Go home. You'll have no problems at the outer gates—the sentries there are my men."

"Thank you, Kristoffer. I'll take my leave, then."

Zack felt heavy with exhaustion. He left the cleanup to Kristoffer and his men, and returned to town. When he reached the outer gates, the sentries were waiting for him.

"We are aware of the situation," said one in a low voice. "We'll take the robe from you."

Zack gave a nod, shed his robe, and handed it over. Then he passed through the gates.

It was the dead of night, and the city was filled with a sleepy quiet. Zack hurried home, careful to avoid late-night patrols. But when he finally arrived before his lodgings, he was stopped in place by a figure standing at its entrance.

"Clemens..."

The silver-haired man had been leaning against the door, but stood up straight at the sight of his friend.

"So you're back."

"What do you want at this hour?" Zack asked in a low voice. Clemens chuckled.

“I was waiting. I figured you would be back around this time.”

“And Shiori?”

“Nadia is looking after her. She woke briefly, just once, but fell back asleep soon after.”

“I see.”

Zack walked up to Clemens. Clemens watched him for a few long moments under the dim street lamps, studying the exhaustion etched into his face, before finally opening his mouth to speak.

“You killed him, didn’t you?”

His tone spoke for him—he wasn’t asking to find out, he was asking to be sure. Zack gave a slight nod.

“No fooling you, is there?” he said.

Clemens smiled.

“I’ve known you since we were both living back at our family homes. I can read you like a book.”

“Ain’t that something.”

They stood facing each other. A number of emotions flashed across Clemens’s face—regret, relief, sorrow. Zack put a hand to one of Clemens’s shoulders, and then leaned forward, resting his forehead on the other.

“Hey. Are you okay?” asked Clemens, concerned.

“I’m just... I’m just a little tired.”

Clemens was a friend with whom he could be honest. And perhaps it was something like relief that allowed him to, without fully realizing what he was doing, speak his heart.

“I called it judgment...but in the end I’m no different from *him*. That wasn’t an execution or anything like it—it was nothing more than revenge. I wanted revenge for the way he harmed a woman I hold dear.”

Clemens listened silently, and did nothing more than gently pat Zack’s back, comforting him as one might a child. It was the same way Zack had consoled both Clemens and Alec when they were still young and just starting out as adventurers. Zack could only let out a light chuckle at the way the tables had now turned—at the way he was the one taking comfort. For a time Clemens stayed there with him, patting his back.

“I’m...getting too old for this.”

Zack’s muttered words simply melted into the night.

It was the night of the crescent moon. A night during which a curtain fell quietly, silently, to mark the end of a particularly horrible, terrifying incident.

“I’m sorry. I never intended to burden you with a story like this so soon after your return.”

“Don’t let it bother you,” said Alec. “I wanted to know, after all.”

Alec was standing with Zack at the entrance to his lodgings. It was still too early to be called midnight, but they kept their voices low and quiet.

“Thanks for having me, Alec. You make sure you get yourself a proper rest this time, you hear?”

“Don’t worry, I will. By the way, what about the documents you brought with you?”

Zack was empty-handed. Alec turned back to his room upstairs.

“Ah, the documents? I don’t need them. Get rid of them for me, would you?”

“Got it. Stay safe, Zack.”

It was a silly thing to say to an S-rank adventurer, but it was all he could think of for a goodbye. Zack chuckled.

“See you soon.”

Alec watched as his friend disappeared quietly into the snowy cityscape, then locked the front door to the lodgings and returned to his own room. He took the documents and the newspaper from the table—the records of a most terrifying crime. The truth of a case that had been solved and then dealt with in secrecy. He stared at them for a time, then added them to the fireplace.

The papers burned from the edges, and the flames spread quickly, turning them to ash before his very eyes. He broke the remnants up with the fire iron and sighed. Leaving the food on the table, he collapsed into bed.

I feel completely drained.

Alec felt wracked by the weary exhaustion that still clung tight to his heart. He put a hand over his eyes, blocking the light from the room’s magical lanterns. The nation that his younger brother governed over was a quiet place where one could live well—and yet it had its shadows. There was evil lurking there, like something oozing in the darkness.

That was Ranvald—he was part of that darkness. He was a monster in the form of a refined gentleman. And then there was the woman who had returned from within that darkness—a woman who had been targeted by Ranvald’s poison, scarred horribly, and yet hid those injuries and smiled.

He thought of her then. Shiori. He thought of her gentle smile like the light of the sun between the trees. The care she always had for her lapis-colored friend. The enjoyment she took from cooking, and the way she seemed so happy to see people enjoying the meals she prepared with her own two hands. The way her face flushed red when

she was teased, and how she subtly turned her gaze away.

And he suddenly saw her face wracked with tears.

"Please, don't leave me."

Words that clung to lips that trembled.

"Shiori..."

Alec wanted to see her. He wanted to see her and to wrap her delicate body in his arms. To hold her and to pamper her.

"Tomorrow."

He would go to her tomorrow, if only just to see her face. He would see her. Hear her voice. Hold her. Kiss her. And then...

And then...

But he never finished the thought. Alec's consciousness was pulled into the darkness of his closed eyes, where he finally fell asleep.

Chapter 3: To New Days

1

“I’m home...”

Shiori uttered the words as she opened the door to her apartment, even though there was nobody to hear them. She was grateful for the pechka room heaters that kept everything warm even while she was away.

She tidied up her luggage somewhat, then headed straight to the bathroom and began running a bath. She’d intended to have one while she was away, but the incident had seen to it that she couldn’t. She very much wanted to go straight to sleep as she was, but it would have left her feeling icky.

Shiori took off her clothes and glanced briefly at the scars on her arms. They were parts of herself she tried not to look at. Parts of herself she tried not to think about. But now they had been seen.

And yet...

“Your worth, your value, it is not determined by the scars you carry.”

“I have never thought of abandoning you.”

Words he’d spoken before embracing her.

“Alec...”

She thought of his warmth as she slipped quietly into the bathtub. A pleasant heat spread through her body, but she knew that if she stayed there too long she’d fall fast asleep. She made it a point to wash herself and get out of the bath quickly. Even Rurii, who usually enjoyed bathtime, must have been exhausted too—the slime was out of the bath quicker than usual.

“We’ll get to bed just as soon as we’ve eaten,” Shiori said.

Shiori took the food she’d bought from the stalls and spread it across the table. Rurii immediately dove for the skewer. The slime seemed to enjoy it too—eating it in a single gulp and then trembling with satisfaction. She smiled at Rurii’s gesture, then took a bite from her own sandwich.

“Hm...?”

The citrus fruit jam sandwich should have been delicious, but eating it felt like a chore. She struggled to swallow another bite.

“Hm. I guess I really *am* tired...”

Perhaps she was so exhausted she couldn’t even appreciate its flavor. She wrapped the sandwich back up into its waxen paper and

placed it in the cold storage. Then, realizing she should drink something, she poured some berry syrup into a glass of ice and drank it. Unlike the sandwich, it went down easily and tasted great. She rinsed out the glass.

“Sorry, Rurii,” Shiori said, “I think I’ll go to bed early. Help yourself to the sandwich in the cold storage if you’re still hungry.”

Rurii’s aura turned to one of kind concern. It watched her for a moment before giving a single, wobbly nod. Shiori changed into her pajamas, said good night to Rurii, then dove under the covers of her bed. Her thoughts slipped from her mind almost as soon as she closed her eyes, and she was pulled into the depths of sleep.

The following morning, Shiori let out a moan from under the covers. She felt lethargic, and her joints ached.

“Oh my... I think I have a fever...”

The exhaustion had caught up with her. It had probably taken hold the previous evening, when she’d felt something strange at dinner.

Are you okay?

The slime quivered as it sat by her pillow, making its worried message clear. Shiori was glad she had the day off—at least she could rest her body without having to worry about anything. A day of sleep would likely do wonders for her.

“I’m so sorry, Rurii, but I’m going to be sleeping most of today, so if you get hungry just eat whatever you please.”

Fortunately, there was food available. Rurii was also dexterous enough to open bottles all on its own too. The slime reached out with a feeler and patted her neck. Perhaps it was telling her to take it easy. She watched the slime as it hopped off the bed and wandered towards the kitchen, and then she closed her eyes once more.

2

Slam!

Alec heard the sounds of a door opening, then slamming shut, followed by the echo of rushed footsteps going down the staircase. Then the sound of the door to the entrance of the lodging being unlocked. The tenant on the floor above probably had things to do.

“Hm...”

Alec opened his eyes a smidge. The room was bright. It was morning. He’d forgotten to extinguish the magical lanterns before bed. His gaze wandered the room and settled on the clock hanging on the wall—it was already past eight. He’d fallen asleep right there on his bed. He lifted himself up slowly.

The food and drink from the previous evening's gloomy affair was still there on the table as he'd left it. The food had gone dry, but he wrapped it in its wax paper and threw it in the cold storage. It had lost some of its flavor, but he could still warm it up for an easy dinner. Alec started boiling some water in a pot and looked through the portable foods he still had.

"Hmm... Guess I'll take the risotto."

He put it in a bowl, added water, then stirred it with a spoon. He brought some of the square-cut vegetables and cheese to his mouth. There was the subtle scent of milk, and his mouth filled with a perfect saltiness. It was the taste of Shiori's warmth and consideration.

Alec glanced at the baggage in the corner of the room, and the request items he'd gathered.

"I'll have to take them to Bertil..."

It had been a few days since he'd gathered the items that Bertil had requested, and he wanted to deliver them before they deteriorated. Then he'd go to see Shiori.

He took his time eating the risotto, then hurriedly washed the dishes and cleaned up. He changed from his pajamas into his adventurer gear and left with Bertil's request items in hand.

Snow had fallen during the evening, and Alec noticed residents clearing away the snow here and there. He walked paths packed with snow towards Bertil's shop, which was located in the area of the eastern gate, on the same road the Guild was on. Bread Studio Nilsson occupied the first floor of an ivory-colored building.

Bertil Nilsson was obsessed with the yeast used to make bread. He was quite the eccentric, and was also a registered adventurer known as the "yeast hunter." He baked bread with yeast gathered from a variety of plants in a variety of locations, and this gave them strong, rich flavors. His bakery was easily one of the two most popular in the Third District.

Alec stood at the door to the bakery, where he could see a great many customers through the shop's sash windows. However, his feet didn't seem to want to move.

I just had to go and take one of Bertil's requests, didn't I...?

Alec took a deep breath and mustered up his courage. Then, he opened the door to the bakery. The scent of baked bread washed over him, and as he looked around he saw a cute assistant in a baker's outfit, and a tall man hurriedly at work. The man wore a clean white shirt, beige slacks that brought to mind fresh bread, and an apron with the name of the bakery embroidered on it. He had dark red hair cut short, coal-gray eyes, and handsome features. He was also in good shape—nobody would have argued that he was a very good-looking man.

And it was that very man who turned and caught sight of Alec's figure in the doorway, then beamed a great smile as he spoke.

"Oh! My oh me oh my! If it isn't my one and only Alec! Oh, *honey* I am *overjoyed* to see that you made it home safe!"

Alec immediately shut the door again. Then he leaned his back against it. He looked up at the sky with blank eyes and thought vaguely of Shiori.

Yes—I'll go to a nice street vendor somewhere and buy something she likes. Then we can have lunch together. Yes, that's exactly what I'll do.

The thoughts were a vain attempt to escape reality. Alec just could not come to terms with the dichotomy of Bertil: good looks but *that* sort of voice.

The bakery door opened forcefully behind him and Alec felt something strong grip his arm and drag him into the shop.

"Wha—?!"

He tried to struggle but it proved futile—he was at the whims of the strong grip that dragged him further into the bakery. It was a grip that belonged to a man who was tall and strong, and handled Alec with no difficulties whatsoever. Alec couldn't help but wonder—if he spent his days kneading bread, would he too develop Bertil's fantastic physical strength?

"What *are* you doing, Alec? Ever the shy one, aren't you, honey?"

"Stop it! Let me go! I can walk on my own!"

The commotion left a few customers with eyes and mouths agape, but most simply went completely silent. To be fair, the latter reaction was the correct one—it was an unspoken rule understood by all that there were things about the owner of Bread Studio Nilsson that one did not notice or see. In truth, the problem was not really with what one could see, *per se*, but rather the tone of voice that stood in stark contrast to the man's appearance.

Among the truly handsome, Bertil Nilsson was perhaps the biggest disappointment of them all. Many a woman who visited the Third District did leave with a heavy sigh—*Such a dreamboat of a man, and yet...*

Alec looked around in a panic for help, but the adventurers already inside of the bakery pointedly avoided his gaze.

Cowards, all of you!

In his heart he spat venom, but nobody came to save him, and Alec was dragged summarily into the office at the back of the bakery. It was only then that Bertil released his grip, at which point Alec backed away from him and let out a sharp sigh of relief.

"I brought your request items," said Alec, placing the airtight containers on the desk. "I'm sorry I was late. A few days have passed since I gathered them, so they may have spoiled. If that's the case, I'm

prepared to go out again.”

“You. Are. So. Sincere. You just wait right there and let Bertil take a little look-see.”

Alec took a seat and sipped at the tea Bertil offered while he watched the baker take a closer look at the snow violets and powder snow grass. Viewed like this, Bertil seemed every bit like a dignified and stately knight captain.

What a man, and yet...

Alec let out a small, imperceptible sigh.

“Oh, my word! That baker—is he not the most handsome thing you’ve ever seen?”

But it was Bertil’s voice that dashed the hopes of many a woman who entered his bakery, and they left looking as if they had just tasted the most bitter of medicines. It was the sound of an effeminate, doting, and affectionate voice, coming from the lips of a powerful, handsome man. There was nothing else for them to call it but a true pity.

“All done!”

Bertil lifted his head after checking each item separately. The tone of his voice, so sing-song in nature, caused Alec to groan involuntarily, but Bertil seemed not to notice and smiled instead.

“A few of them have grown discolored, but there’s still more than enough here for me to get what I need. Oh, I am so *very* thankful! It must have been so hard on you, no? You picked up so much quality powder snow grass... You A-rankers are just fabulous.”

“Oh, about that...”

Alec explained that it was the work of Shiori’s familiar, Rurii, and Bertil’s eyes grew wide with surprise before he broke into another smile.

“*Lovely* Rurii, what a wonder! I had a feeling that slime was a smarty, but I guess that means I can ask Shiori to handle future requests. Hm... But then again, she *will* need protection, won’t she...?”

“Not a problem,” said Alec. “If she needs an escort, I’m your guy.”

“Oh *my*,” muttered Bertil, his grin utterly dripping with meaning. “So the rumors *are* true, are they?”

Alec chuckled.

“I’m not even going to ask,” he said.

“Oh, I *completely* understand. A girl as hard working and lovely as Shiori, though, it’s *such* a waste for her to be all on her little lonesome. But then, there’s *you*...”

“What? What are you getting at with that tone of voice?”

“Well, she went through all that she did, and I’m sure it couldn’t have been easy. And yet she acts like nothing happened, and she smiles that quiet little smile of hers. Why, there’s no doubt that Zack

or Clemens could have made that girl happy—but they didn't even raise a pinky! Such cowardly little boys!"

Bertil spoke almost regretfully, and though it put Alec off a little, he could also vaguely understand the sentiment. It was true that both Zack and Clemens would have made fine, caring partners for Shiori. And perhaps Shiori too would have been able to shed her loneliness sooner. But both Zack and Clemens were heavy with the guilt of not being able to protect her, and feared they would only hurt her further. That was why they could only watch over her from a distance.

In contrast, Shiori had saved Alec. He felt they healed each other in the days they spent together. That was the reason he wished earnestly to be a place for her to find healing. He hoped that they might support one another.

"Are you *sure* you're up to the task of looking after her, though?"

"Yes, I am."

It struck Alec then that he'd only come to deliver Bertil's request, but now they'd delved into different conversational territory altogether.

"Come, now. Give me your request ticket so I can sign it for you."

Alec passed it over, and Bertil signed it in bold, confident letters.

"Request complete! I'll be counting on you, Alec, honey."

"Count on me all you want, but also—I'm not your honey!"

Alec left the bakery with his job done and a bag of bread he'd been gifted. He shifted the bag under his arm and thought about what to do. Was Shiori already awake? Was she taking it easy and resting at home?

"Knowing her, she might already be up and working..."

It was all too easy for Alec to imagine, and he chuckled at the thought.

In any case, Alec decided to stop by the street stalls and take a look around. There was a whole variety of them out at the moment, with the Nativity Festival on the near horizon. He walked the streets checking out the different stalls, then noticed a lapis-colored object pass by. He took a closer look, and just as he thought—it was Rurii. The slime seemed to see Alec too, and lifted a feeler to wobble a hello. Still, he couldn't help noticing that the slime was alone.

"Something wrong? On your own today, huh?"

Perhaps the slime had decided to go outside while Shiori rested. That's what he thought at first, but when the slime gestured to him, he soon realized that wasn't the case.

"You want me to follow you?"

The slime trembled in the affirmative. It felt strange for Alec to follow the slime down the street, and passersby also threw him

curious glances as they walked. But as they kept moving, Alec realized something—this was the way to Shiori’s apartment. And when the slime finally came to a stop, it was, as Alec expected, in front of a building he recognized. He looked up at the second floor, where the curtains to Shiori’s room were still closed. Perhaps she was still sleeping.

“Did something happen to her?” asked Alec.

The slime quivered.

3

Shiori was somewhat conscious of sounds around her as she dozed. She sensed someone. Whoever it was, they approached her and stopped by her bedside. Then a hand touched her forehead lightly. It was a gentle, reassuring touch. Shiori’s eyes fluttered open.

“Alec...?”

His dark magenta eyes stared down at her, full of worry. She tried to sit up but he stopped her.

“Rest,” he said. “You’ve got a fever.”

“Okay...”

His hand went from her forehead to her cheek. It was a cool, pleasant feeling, perhaps because her body temperature was so high.

“How...?” she asked.

She wondered how he’d gotten there. Rurii wobbled by her pillow side.

“Rurii called me over.”

“Oh...”

Even Rurii was worried about her. That the slime had called Alec and not her big brother felt like a deliberate decision, though. Shiori wasn’t entirely sure what to make of it.

“Shiori.”

“Hm?”

“Please don’t tell me you had this fever while we were out on the expedition.”

Shiori smiled.

“No, of course not. It’s been a while since I’ve had a fever at all. I must have been exhausted.”

She’d been pulled into an unexpected incident, then been injured, then people had seen the scars she’d tried to hide for so long, and on top of all of it she’d revealed a story and feelings that she’d kept long hidden inside of her.

“I’m relieved to hear it,” said Alec, his voice heavy with concern.

“Have you eaten?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Do you need anything?”

“Hm... I’d like some water. There’s some in the cold storage, it’s...”

“You just wait. I’ll get it.”

Shiori watched Alec leave the room, then closed her eyes. It was quite the struggle to open them with her fever. She dozed as Alec brought the water for her. When she tried to sit up, he supported her back with a hand. She took the glass he passed her in her hand, and he helped to guide it as she brought it to her mouth. She drank slowly. It felt like the heat in her body cooled slightly.

“Thank you...”

“Don’t mention it.”

Usually she would feel embarrassed to be in her current situation, but with her fever she felt a desire for comfort, and it was right there in the sensation of being snug in Alec’s arms. She couldn’t help but feel a certain loneliness when he set her back down in her bed. She heard the sound of water by her bedside, then felt a wet towel being placed on her forehead.

“Do you want anything else?”

Even if he didn’t look after her, she knew her fever would subside so long as she rested.

Is it okay to ask? Is it okay to say that I want him to stay because I’m lonely?

As she lay there at a loss for words, Alec seemed to be able to tell what she wanted, and spoke the words she longed to hear.

“You want me to stay?”

“But...you must be tired, Alec. We only got back yesterday...”

She was happy for his kindness, but she felt bad asking so much of him. Alec let out a cheeky laugh. It sounded like he had something up his sleeve.

“If I get tired, I’ll just sleep right there with you. You’re so small it looks like there’s plenty of room for the both of us.”

Of course, he was joking. But perhaps because of the fever, she felt an innocent joy at the idea.

“Really?”

“I... What?”

“You’ll really sleep next to me?”

Alec’s eyes went wide with shock. He had never imagined she’d reply as she did, and for a moment he was flustered. But she wanted him by her side. She wanted him to hold her gently. She shifted her body sluggishly and made space in her bed.

“Shiori...”

Hesitant, Alec took a short breath. Then he unclipped his equipment and took off his jacket and boots, and slipped under the covers. He brought her cheek to his chest and softly wrapped her in

his arms. She let herself fall into the warmth and scent of his body as she drifted into sleep.

“Rest now, Shiori. Rest now and recover. Rurii is worried about you.”

“Thank you...”

“Sleep well, Shiori.”

His gentle whisper tickled her ears, and her consciousness quietly melted into the darkness.

“Hm...?”

Alec had intended to put Shiori to sleep and then get right up, but found that while he’d held her warm body in his arms, he’d also dozed off.

Alec quietly lifted himself up and put a hand to Shiori’s cheek as she slept by his side. She still had a higher temperature than normal, and there was a steamy, humid warmth to her skin. He saw her collarbone peeking out from her thin pajamas, the sweat beading on her bare skin, the slight furrow of her brow, the flush of her cheeks, the shallow breaths from her half-open mouth, and her black hair spread across her pillow—and in that moment he saw flashing images of carnal desire. He tore his gaze away.

What in the world are you thinking at a time like this?!

Alec shook his head and pushed the thoughts from his mind, then slipped out of the covers so as not to wake Shiori. He took the towel that had slipped from her head and washed it in the basin, before squeezing it tight and putting it back on Shiori’s forehead. He watched her sleep for a time, then kissed her lightly and looked up at the clock. It was past lunch. He’d slept longer than he thought.

He left the bedroom and entered the dining room, where Rurii trembled a greeting as it ate. The slime had opened up bottles and put the contents of them on plates.

“Quite the dexterous one, aren’t you?”

The slime pushed a plate towards Alec. There were pickled vegetables and mussels in oil. Rurii wanted to share them with him.

“Thank you,” he said.

Alec took a small plate and cutlery from the shelves, then separated the pickles and mussels between them. He took one of the round multi-grain buns he’d received from Bertil, cut a slit in it, and made a simple sandwich with the mussels. He made a few of them and offered one to Rurii. The slime let out a happy wobble and absorbed the sandwich into its body. Alec watched it as he took a bite of his own sandwich. His mouth filled with the rich taste of mussels and the vibrant flavors of various grains. He finished it off and washed it down with some water, then helped himself to some of the pickled

vegetables. The delightfully sweet and acidic flavor soaked into his still-weary body.

“Wow, that’s good...” he said without thinking.

The slime wobbled in agreement.

“And you always get to eat this kind of thing?”

Rurii shook side to side—a boastful gesture. Alec was jealous.

He went on eating his lunch and occasionally talking to the slime, which answered by shaking its body or gesturing with a feeler. It was a strange thing to share lunch with a slime that didn’t use words to communicate but all the same had a wide range of expressions. Strange, yes...but also enjoyable.

“Ah, that reminds me. Do you know what Shiori’s favorite foods are?”

She said she didn’t have an appetite, but he thought that perhaps she’d eat a little of her favorite food. He’d shared meals with her on a number of occasions, but she always made a wide range of meals to match the preferences of her companions. Even now, he still didn’t know her likes and dislikes. He couldn’t even guess from the times they had eaten out at restaurants, because she ordered something different every time as a reference for her own repertoire.

The slime looked for a moment to be deep in thought, then it dropped from the table and pointed with a feeler at a few of the bottles on the shelves. Candied cherries and applesauce.

“Fruits...?”

Then he remembered that the night before, she’d bought a jam and candied-fruit sandwich.

“Well, let’s buy some fruit, then.”

Alec finished his lunch and checked in on Shiori, who was still fast asleep. He took a pencil and paper, scribbled a note saying he would be back soon, and put it by her pillow.

“I’m heading out,” he said to the slime. “I won’t be long.”

He put on his cloak and left. There was no sign of Lache at the entrance. Perhaps he was out. Alec made his way quickly to the grocer’s, where the owner Marius’s eyes went wide with shock.

“Quite the rare sight, this one,” he said.

It certainly was rare to see Alec among fresh foods and vegetables, as he was more inclined to eat out or to buy something ready-made.

“You looking for something, Alec?”

“I’d like fresh fruit, if you have any?”

“Hm...if it’s fresh you’re after, this is the best we’ve got. Plenty of bottled options, though.”

Marius came out from behind the counter and showed him to a corner of the store. There were only three choices: apples, snow grapes, and light snow strawberries. The rest was either frozen or

processed. Fresh fruit just wasn't common in the winter months.

"All right then..."

After some thought, Alec picked the grapes and strawberries, which were in season. As he looked at the white fruits being wrapped, he happened to recall his own childhood.

"Ah. Do you have ice cream?"

He thought back to when, as a boy, he'd been given ice cream when he had a fever. Shiori might be able to eat something like that. It was nutritious and it was just right for her body, which was weak from the fever.

"That we do not, sorry... Funny you should ask, though—an unexpected visitor arrives, and he's looking for what you'd least expect."

Fruit and ice cream wasn't really what people expected a single man living by himself to go hunting for, after all.

"A friend of mine has a fever," said Alec.

Marius laughed.

"Oh, I see."

He tilted his head and gave Alec a knowing look as he thought. Then he handed over the wrapped fruit and smiled.

"They sell ice cream at the café on the main street in the Second District. Can't remember the name of the place, but you can't miss it—the signboard has yellow lettering on a blue background."

It wouldn't take long to get to the Second District and back. Alec thanked Marius for the help and paid him.

"And say hello to Shiori for me!" shouted Marius as Alec left.

Alec was silent. He hadn't even mentioned her name once. First Bertil, now this—just how far had this rumor spread? Alec felt a tingling of embarrassment as he hurried towards the Second District.

"Ah, this must be the place, then."

Yellow letters on a blue background—the Dancing Teapot. Alec frowned as he peered through the windows and surveyed the cutesy interior. There were some tourists there, but mostly it was full of girls and housewives from wealthy families. The name of the place, the customers—there was no escaping the fact that Alec would be a fish out of water here. But...

Do it for Shiori.

Alec swallowed his pride and opened the door to the Dancing Teapot. Inside, the café was filled with the aroma of baked sweets and the sound of girls laughing over tea and desserts. Alec was frozen for a brief moment as he felt eyes from all over the café lock on to him. He was only too aware of what they must all have been thinking, but he stayed calm and kept moving. At the back of the café was an impressive cold storage refrigerator, powered by magic stones and

used especially for frozen goods. It was lined with a variety of desserts, each colored by a different fruit syrup.

“Welcome. Can I help you with anything?”

The café employee smiled pleasantly. Unlike the ogling eyes of the customers, this girl seemed refined. There was nothing hidden in her smile, and it relaxed Alec, who ordered two berry jam desserts and a vanilla ice cream for himself.

“To go, please,” he added.

“Not a problem. Please wait a moment.”

The café’s lively atmosphere had returned. Alec watched in silence as his desserts were wrapped, and as he did so, he could not help but hear the conversation at the table directly behind him.

“Hey, check out that guy. He’s cute.”

“A bit rough around the edges if you ask me, but such a handsome face, I must admit.”

“Do you think he’s an adventurer? I just *love* it when a man has more of a wild side than your usual gentlemen.”

“You think he’s single?”

At a glance, it was clear to Alec that he was the only adventurer in the café. He prepared himself for the worst—he had a feeling it was coming.

“How about we talk to him? He might tell us about one of his adventures!”

“Good idea. Let’s invite him to join us for a cup of tea.”

“Stop it, you two,” said a third voice, chiding them. “Don’t be a nuisance. You can see he’s buying desserts to take home, no? That probably means someone is waiting for him there, don’t you think?”

But that voice was summarily ignored. Alec groaned internally as he heard the sounds of chairs pushing away from their table and then footsteps approaching.

“Um, excuse me, mister swordsman?”

As expected, they’d decided to talk to him. Alec turned to find two well-dressed young women. At a glance, they appeared to be lower-class nobles or daughters of the wealthy. There was an odd passion in their eyes—and not the sort of gaze one held when talking to a stranger. Alec’s brow furrowed as he was reminded of the loathsome life he’d lived in the castle.

“What?”

The girls flinched at Alec’s icy response, but were not about to leave until they’d said their piece.

“If you happen to have some time, would you care to join us for a cup of tea?” asked one.

“We’re very much interested in tales of your adventures. That is, if you would be happy to share them...” said the other.

“Excuse me,” said Alec, cutting the girl off before she could finish, “but I must return home. There is someone expecting me.”

One of the girls accepted his reply, but the other did not.

“Oh, but...” she began to say.

How annoying. He’d already told them that someone was waiting for him. Was that not enough?

“I came here to buy desserts because *my wife* has a fever,” he said. “Do you understand?”

He’d lied to drive the point home. The two girls exchanged a glance, and gave a hushed apology. At this point, the third girl came hurrying over.

“I told you, didn’t I? You don’t just go talking to people you don’t know!” she said, and then looked up at Alec. “I apologize for holding you up.”

“It’s fine...”

Alec took his desserts from the café employee and glanced at the girls, who were returning to their table. He paid for the treats and left quickly.

“What a pain...”

He wasn’t on the level of a Clemens or a Zack in terms of drawing attention, but Alec was still aware that society considered him handsome. On past occasions he had accepted a few similar invitations, but he was never comfortable in those positions.

Suddenly feeling tired, Alec hurried back, wanting nothing more than to see Shiori’s face again. When he arrived at the apartment, he bumped into Lache, who was covered in snow. He’d been helping a neighboring building with their snow shoveling, and perhaps because of all the hard work, he was rubbing gingerly at his left leg. He let out a wry chuckle when he noticed Alec.

“Are you okay?” asked Alec.

Lache let out a sigh.

“An adorable young lady asked me for some help, and well—perhaps I got a little carried away.”

An adorable young lady. The words aroused in Alec the image of an alluring beauty, but the young lady in question turned out to be a cute little five-year-old girl. Her father couldn’t do the shoveling because of an injury at work, and it seemed Lache had jumped in to help.

“Tell her she can always ask the Guild for that kind of work. There’s no shortage of people who would happily pick up a kid’s request for free.”

“I will most definitely pass the message along next time she asks,” said Lache, and then he noticed the box Alec was carrying. “Well now, that’s not something you see every day. You bought ice cream?”

Lache had recognized the shop logo on the box. The man was quite knowledgeable about the kingdom, and it seemed he already knew of the café.

“Shiori broke out into a fever. She doesn’t have much of an appetite, so I thought this might help.”

“Ah... So she really *was* tired, then. It seemed like quite the ordeal. I read about it in the paper.”

The incident in Brovito Village was already being reported on. It was the front-page story in the issue of the Tris Times on the apartment counter.

“Please tell her to take care of herself,” said Lache.

“Will do.”

He turned away from Lache and had begun heading up the stairs when the caretaker called up to him again.

“And Alec, please make sure you take care of yourself too. It’s only been a day since your return, and you’ll need to get some rest.”

Without making it obvious, Lache was talking about the time a month ago, when Alec had stayed the night at Shiori’s with a fever. Alec had been dazed and barely remembered it, but Lache had also helped out. He could only let out a wry chuckle, and replied with an affirmative wave of his hand.

Upon his return, he found that Shiori was awake. She held his memo in hand as she stared blankly into space. Rurii sat kindly by her side.

“Welcome back,” Shiori said.

He noticed a touch of relief in her voice. She’d been lonely while he was away. Alec took the towel from her forehead and put a hand to it. Her fever still hadn’t dropped. He wet the towel, wrung it out, and put it on her forehead again.

“I bought ice cream,” he said. “I thought maybe you’d be able to eat it.”

Shiori’s eyes widened slightly at the sight of the box.

“Wow...” she uttered.

“How about it?”

“Yes, I think I can eat some. You bought it for me?”

“I did.”

“Thank you. I’m so happy.”

Her eyes closed as she smiled. He put a hand to her head and gave her a gentle kiss. Then he took a spoon from the shelf and opened the box. He took the ice cream with berry jam and gave it to Rurii, who looked very intrigued by it. The slime trembled happily and even bent forward as if to give a little bow. Alec watched with a smile as it reached out with a feeler and gingerly licked at the dessert, then he took a spoonful of Shiori’s dessert and brought it to her mouth.

“Oh?”

“Let me feed you,” said Alec. “This way, you can enjoy the dessert and rest in bed at the same time.”

“Er...”

Shiori was embarrassed by the idea, but Alec ignored this and once more brought the spoon to her mouth. She timidly allowed him to feed her the ice cream, at which point her lips slowly curled into a smile.

“It’s delicious...” she said.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

He went on feeding her the ice cream until she’d eaten about a third of it, at which point Shiori looked up at him.

“What about you, Alec? Won’t you have some?”

“I bought a little for myself too. But don’t worry about me—this is all yours.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you.”

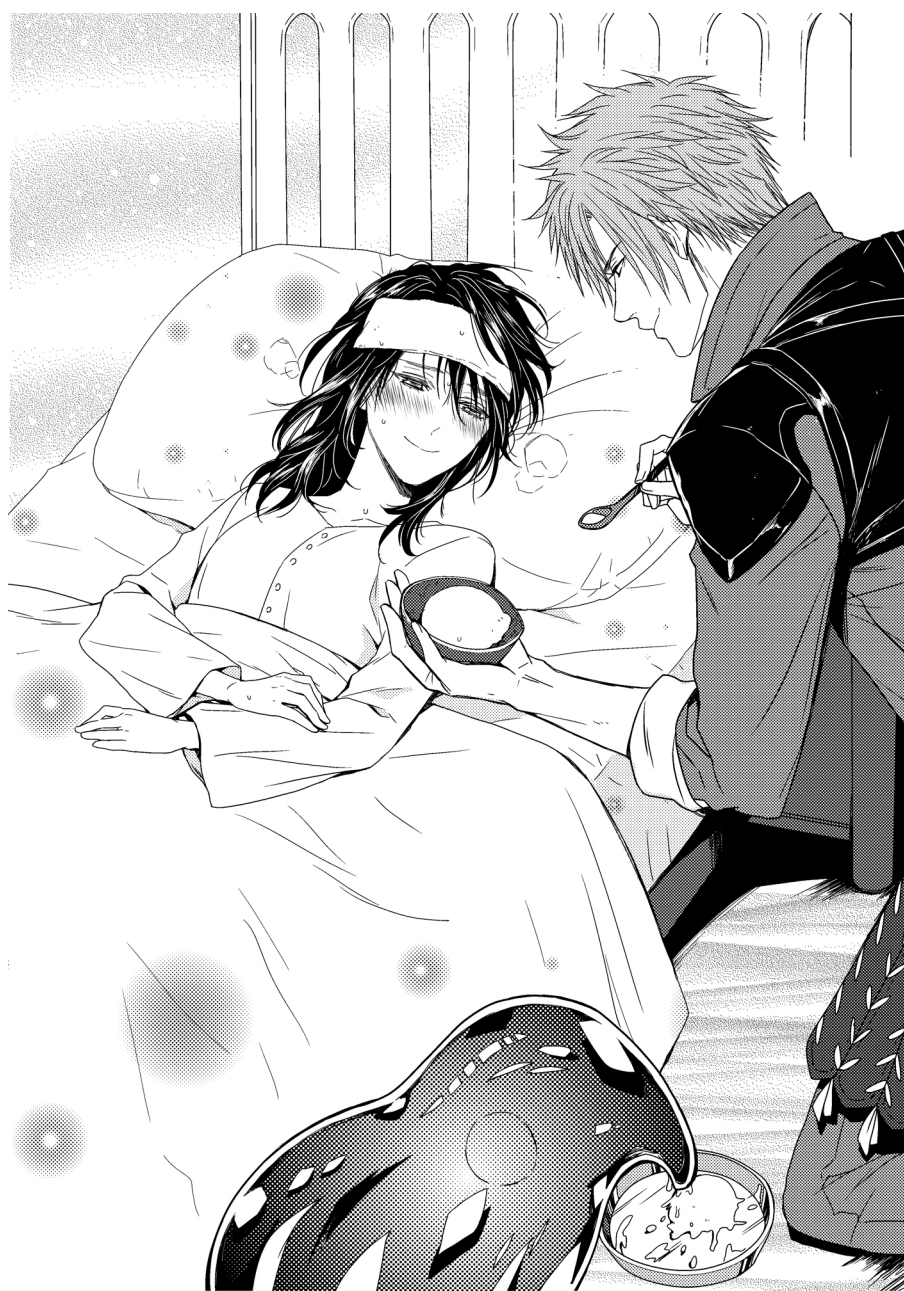
He gave Shiori another spoonful of ice cream. She let it melt in her mouth and swallowed it. Then her head tilted to the side with a slight curiosity.

“Do you like ice cream, Alec?” she asked.

“I do.”

“It seems a little out of character,” she said.

“It does, doesn’t it?” replied Alec with a chuckle. It was perhaps rare for men in their thirties to admit to a love of ice cream. “Even now, I still remember vividly the first time I ever ate ice cream. It was such a shock to realize that such a cold, delicious treat existed in this world of ours.”



He'd been eight at the time, and living in the castle, where they sometimes served vanilla ice cream.

"I didn't get it very often because they said it made the body cold, but I remember once, when I had a fever, my father brought some to me in secret. He told me it was a special treat."

Alec's feelings for his father were complicated, even after all these years, but the man had done his best to be a father, as if to try and make up for what Alec had gone through. As the old memories of his youth drifted to his mind, Shiori put a hand to his cheek. She stroked it gently, with a hand still warm with fever.

"What is it?" he asked, puzzled by the gesture.

Shiori smiled.

"You just... You looked so kind just now."

"Ah..."

The gentle scent of vanilla, cold and sweet—one of the few memories he had of being with his father. And it was because of those memories that he could not bring himself to hate the man. In truth, he had never hated him.

For a time, Alec and Shiori remained silent. The room was quiet, save for the occasional clink of the spoon against the dessert cup. But it wasn't an unpleasant silence. It filled the air with a soft, warm, and tender atmosphere.

"You ate the whole lot," Alec said, eventually.

"Thank you. It was so delicious."

"Good. Now, get some sleep."

"Okay."

There was a flash of anxiety across her face, and Alec put a hand to her cheek.

"Rest easy," he said. "I'll be here until your fever goes down."

"Really?"

"Yes. So you can rest easy."

He kissed her lips, cold from the ice cream. Then he licked the hint of vanilla and berry at the edge of her lips, and Shiori laughed at how it tickled.

"Thank you," she said. "Okay, I'll get some sleep."

"Good. Rest well."

He kissed her once more, rubbed her cheek, then pulled her blanket up to her shoulders. After a little time, he heard the sounds of her relaxed breathing, and knew that she had fallen asleep.

It looked as if Rurii had finished its dessert too, and it wobbled a gesture of thanks. Alec smiled in response. He took the empty dessert cup, which had been licked completely clean, and washed it along with Shiori's own cup and spoon. He shook them free of water then

set them down next to the basin.

Alec went back to the café box for his own vanilla ice cream. He took it to the windowsill and looked outside. Twilight was falling, and the town was blanketed in white. As the sky darkened, the snow was tinted blue. Alec stared out at the colors of the town and brought some ice cream to his lips. It was cold and sweet—a flavor that brought to mind his youth.

It had been snowing then too—the day he'd first come down with a fever and been bedridden at the castle, trying to adapt to a lifestyle so different from what he knew.

“In the end, I could not be with the woman I loved...but I pray that you may live happily, married to a woman you adore with all of your heart.”

Alec remembered them at that moment—the words his father had spoken as he left Alec's room. It was his father's heart laid bare, the man unable to be by Alec's mother's side because of their difference in status.

Alec's mother was the daughter of a lower noble from the countryside. She was not as ostentatious as the women of the royal capital, and was instead of a simple, kindly disposition. She was a gentle woman who healed the space around her with an all-encompassing warmth.

Yes, he realized. Though in appearances he shared only the color of his eyes with his father, in truth they also had one more thing in common.

“We both like the same kind of woman...”

Simple, kindly, and warm—familial.

Alec let out a quiet chuckle at the realization. His father had put them through a lonely life of poverty, and though he could not let go of his complicated feelings for the man, Alec could never bring himself to hate his father. He felt some embarrassment at this unexpected connection between them.

“I will be happy with the woman I love, just like you wanted,” he said, “so you can rest in peace, father.”

The words left his mouth with nowhere to go, spoken to a father who was no more than a memory, now. They were a promise, and a pledge.

Shiori drifted between shallow sleep and fluttering periods of waking. And each time, Alec gave her water, held her hand, and put a reassuring hand to her head until she fell back asleep. At times she muttered as if having a bad dream, but when he woke her gently and held her in his arms, Shiori once more fell back into peaceful slumber. Perhaps because of her fever, Shiori took the pampering gestures

without embarrassment. She struck him as so very dear in the way she smiled with such joy at each kiss and hug.

In the dark of the night, Alec was reading one of Shiori's books by the light of the magic lanterns. He looked up at the clock and saw that it was almost midnight. He touched Shiori's forehead as she slept by his side. Her fever was considerably better than it had been in the morning. She would no longer need the wet towel, and at this rate she'd be mostly back to normal by the following day. Rurii was spread out, deep in sleep, on the floor by his feet.

"I suppose I should get some sleep too."

Alec went to the bathroom and washed his face. He dried it with a hand towel, then rinsed out his mouth. He returned to Shiori's room and wondered where to sleep. It seemed the obvious choice was the sofa. He looked over at Shiori's face.

"You'll really sleep with me?"

He remembered the look on her face as she'd asked that of him. Telling himself that it was the girl's own desire, he slipped under the covers next to her. He brushed away the hair that had fallen over her face, and her eyes opened.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?" Alec asked.

"It's fine..."

She looked much better after resting, and there was a slight flush in her cheeks as she smiled.

"You really are here with me," she said.

"I am."

He pulled her delicate body close, and her hands wrapped hesitantly around his back. He took note of the sweet scent that drifted from her soft body and her hair.

"Alec..."

"What is it?"

"About what you said, about working together."

"Mm."

He'd told her that if she were frightened of joining a fixed party, she could team up with him. That was yesterday. Traveling with a different party every time she went on an expedition could leave her without a chance to relax, and he hoped that in working together, he could be that for her—a place where she could be at ease.

And of course, there was his own desire to be by her side also.

"Can I ask that of you?"

"Of course."

Her answer made him so glad he hugged her tight until, in a small voice, she told him he was crushing her. He relaxed his arms and put his lips to her forehead.

"I'm glad," he said. "Though I offered to be your partner, the truth

is that I hoped you would be mine.”

He showered her forehead and her cheeks with kisses, then finally left a lingering kiss upon her lips, sucking her into himself. Shiori’s temperature rose.

“Are you getting another fever?” he asked.

“And just whose fault is that...?” she whispered, her face flushing red with a mixture of her current condition and embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” said Alec, patting her back and ruffling her hair. “We don’t want you coming down with another fever just as you’re finally recovering. Let’s get some sleep. You’ll be fine in the morning, and we can talk more about work then.”

“Okay...”

Alec put out the magic lantern by the bed, and the room sunk into soft darkness. Through the transparent curtains, the window shone with the soft illumination of the falling snow.

“Good night, Shiori.”

“Good night, Alec.”

They were close enough to feel each other’s breath, and shared the warmth of their bodies as they were pulled gently into a world of sleep.

Alec woke to a pleasant, repetitive knocking, followed by the sound of something boiling and the enticing scent of soup. He lay there for a time, dozing in the comfort and warmth of the blanket and the smells of breakfast, then reached a hand to his side and found that the body he expected to be there...wasn’t. Shiori was gone. Alec had fallen into a deep and reassured sleep, knowing she was by his side, but he hadn’t even noticed her getting out of bed.

Alec quickly sat up and found Rurii on the floor doing something of a morning stretching routine. The slime reached out a feeler to wave him good morning.

Shiori was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Her complexion was healthy, and yet...

The clock showed that it was about ten minutes to seven, but judging by the food laid out on the table, Alec could easily tell she’d woken up significantly earlier than that.

She’s only just recovered from her fever and already she’s doing this...

With a sigh, Alec got out of bed and wrapped Shiori in a hug. Her fever was gone, but...

“Alec? Um... Good morning?”

He heard the slight bewilderment in her voice from between his arms.

“*Somebody* thinks they’re all better and has gone straight back to work.”

“Um, but, really it’s noth— Whoa!”

Before Shiori could finish her sentence, she yelped in surprise as Alec lifted her right off the ground and carried her in his arms back to bed. He laid her on the sheets and looked down at her, pinning her delicate arms to the mattress.

“Alec, um...”

Shiori trembled, flustered, as he ran a finger along her neck.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to push yourself?”

“But I wasn’t? I mean, I’m fully recovered, so...”

“Look—you’ve got today off from work, so at the very least, don’t get up so early the day after you had a fever just to start working again.”

Perhaps Shiori herself wasn’t even aware of what she was doing. Alec could relate to the desire for things to go back to normal because you felt back to normal yourself. However, he wished she would take better care of herself, if only a little.

Shiori had a small, dainty frame. It was apparently standard for people in her hometown, but here she was comparatively on the smaller side. Alec worried that she was putting too much of a strain on her body by trying to keep up with everyone around her.

“I worry about you,” he said.

Shiori’s eyebrows drooped. She whispered an apology.

“I just want you to understand,” said Alec. “Knowing you, I’m guessing you prepared this breakfast for me, right?”

The table was laid out with an impressive array of different dishes, and it wouldn’t have been possible for her to make this much if she hadn’t gotten up early to do it.

“I...I did. You did so much for me yesterday, and I wanted to thank you... I’m sorry. I only made you worry more.”

“I’m happy you feel that way, but right now you should be thinking more of yourself.”

“Yes... I’m sorry.”

Seeing Shiori take her scolding like a guilty child brought out Alec’s playful side.

“That reminds me—didn’t I promise to leave a mark of punishment on you if you pushed yourself?”

“Huh?”

Once again, Shiori was flustered, this time by the grin on Alec’s face. All the same, he placed his lips on her neck. Still pinned down, her body jumped in fright beneath him.

“It’ll be too obvious if you put it there!”

“So you’d prefer it somewhere less obvious?”

“That’s not what I mean!”

His lips crept along her neck, and with a hand he undid the button

of her collar. He ran a hand along her collarbone, and dropped a kiss on the skin beneath it, where it opened into the valley of her chest.

“Alec...”

He sucked up the softness of her skin, ignoring Shiori’s feeble objections, and little by little, left a dark mark. A soft sigh left her mouth, a hazy gasp wrapped in a shiver. Clawing fingers gripped his shoulders.

He looked down at the small mark he’d left, satisfied, and when he raised his head, he felt suddenly frozen in place. Shiori’s messy hair, her flushed skin, the shallow breaths escaping her lips... Her eyes looked up at him, then turned slightly away.

Uh-oh...

Alec felt incredibly turned on. He felt the enthusiasm in how she had reacted to him. She was usually so modest, and yet now there was a growing desire in her. He sat up in a panic. Even if their hearts were in sync, he’d promised himself not to pursue her physically until the deep scars in her heart had found sufficient healing. But when he saw her like this, arousing the lust within him, he felt he might be devoured by his own desire. And yet she stayed there, pinned down of her own volition, without struggle.

Like a table set for a feast... were the words that ran through his head.

No, no, no, no.

Alec released Shiori’s hands and did up her collar.

“Rurii,” he said.

For whatever reason, the slime had simply watched over the events as they had happened, without making any move to stop them. It was likely that, in this moment, the slime was the most levelheaded of the three of them.

“Cool my head for me, Rurii—right now,” said Alec.

The slime’s body brought to mind a deep lake, and Alec hoped it might somehow cool his desires. In his overheated state, he’d had thoughts that would never have occurred to him had he been in a rational frame of mind.

After a moment of silence, the slime wobbled with inspiration, and in the next instant it gripped the washbowl next to Shiori’s pillow with two feelers. The bowl was still filled with water. Alec immediately understood the slime’s intentions, and felt all the blood drain quite suddenly from his head.

“I’m fine! I’m cool!” he shouted. “So do *not*! Throw! That washbowl! At me!”

At Alec’s command, Rurii released its grip on the bowl. Alec hoped that the aura of disappointment he felt from the slime was just his imagination. Shiori, who had been watching the whole thing in

something of a daze, burst into laughter. The desire had all but left her, and the somewhat nervous figure before him was the Shiori he always knew. He wrapped her in a hug, and she giggled in his arms.

“I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

“No, it’s fine. I should apologize too. I promise I’ll rest after breakfast.”

“Please, take it easy.”

They came together in a kiss, and tasted of one another’s tongues for a time.

Eventually, Alec spoke. “Shall we eat?” he asked. “I’ll help clean up.”

“Yes, let’s. And thank you.”

He took Shiori by the hand and they headed to the table, where Shiori’s heartfelt, homemade cuisine was waiting. Rurii wobbled along behind them.

“Oh, by the way,” said Alec, “I bought snow grapes and light snow strawberries. I put them in the cold storage for later.”

“Wow. I’ll set them out as dessert, then.”

Alec pulled out Shiori’s chair for her, then sat down himself. Rurii put its plate by their feet and waited to receive its share. On the table there was a steaming pot of soup, a warm vegetable salad, aromatic grilled bacon and sausages, and a plate of pancakes. Off to the side were bottles and jars of butter, honey, and jam.

“Wow...this looks amazing. What a way to start the day.”

“I went the extra mile because you’re here, Alec.”

It was a breakfast of happiness—something Alec had once lost, and often pined for, but that he had always thought he would never find again. This warmth that he had longed for—a warmth that existed right here, before his eyes—now filled his heart.

“Shiori...”

“Yes?”

“Someday, in the future...will you...”

Will you bring this warmth to a life we can share, and a family we can start together?

But the words stopped in his throat.

“What is it?” Shiori asked.

“It’s...nothing. Something for another time.”

“Hm?”

It was still too soon to be asking for her hand. That was something better left for after their relationship had deepened further. Over the past week they had reached out to each other and grown closer. They had kissed, and slept side by side, and now shared food with warmth and love in their hearts. It was something Alec never could have imagined just a few months ago, so for now, he just wanted to fully

enjoy the simple act of being together.

“Best eat before it goes cold,” said Shiori.

“Yes, you’re right.”

They each gave thanks for their food in their own way, then took their spoons in hand.

This soup...it tastes like warmth and family.

4

After they finished a warm and enjoyable breakfast, and after Alec had helped her clean up, he told Shiori countless times to rest, then gave her a peck on the cheek and went home. She saw him off, then went to bed as she was told.

She put a hand to the mark he’d left on her chest, left in a place where it would not be easily seen. A small bruise. A “mark of punishment,” as he’d called it. But it was also not unlike...

“A mark of possession...”

The way he’d opened her shirt had surprised her, but even more than that...

“I’m happy... It’s like I belong to him.”

Alec had already gone home, and yet, with this mark, it was like she could still feel his warmth. It brought a smile to her face. She pulled the covers up and closed her eyes. She drifted happily in the scent of him that still clung to the bed, and her consciousness faded into an easy and peaceful sleep.

A few days later, Shiori’s weary body was fully healed and back to normal.

It was beautifully clear outside, with skies of endless blue—unusual for the season. The snow piles glistened under the light of the sun. The city streets and their beautiful decorations were bathed in bright light.

“What wonderful weather,” murmured Shiori, staring out the window.

Alec, by her side, agreed.

“Indeed. It’s almost blinding.”

Over the past few days she’d grown used to him hugging her from behind in this way. It was nice to feel the warmth where they touched.

“It’s almost as if the weather is celebrating our new beginning, don’t you think?”

“New beginning?” asked Shiori. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration, no?”

As she spoke, she let her head rest upon his chest, and he hugged

her tighter as he smiled.

Starting today, we're partners, and this day marks the start of us working together as a party of two. I'm not alone. I don't have to feel uncomfortable being with different parties for each request, and he'll be there when I feel lonely. He'll support me.

We'll support each other.

"Shiori..." said Alec, loosening his arms around her. "I still can't bring myself to talk about it, but...I have something I want you to hear."

"What is it?"

"It's about my parents, and the circumstances of my birth...about my life, from then until now. I don't quite have the heart to speak about it yet, but when the time comes...will you listen?"

Under the light of the sun, his wavering eyes of dark magenta looked down at Shiori.

She did not know his background. All she knew, or at least what she sensed, was that he was a man with a complicated history. He was born an illegitimate child, and the life he'd lived had brought him here. Telling the story of that journey was an act that, for him, would surely require great courage. If he were willing to tell it.

"Of course. I'll be here for you... I want to know more about you."

But there was something else she wanted to say, as well.

"One day, I'll tell you my story too," she said.

She would tell him of her own life, and the twenty-something years she had spent in that other world. When the time came, she would tell him that she was from another world—a reality separate from the one they now shared.

"I will wait as long as it takes," Alec said. "I'm here for you."

She did not know if he could accept it, or if he would. But all the same, she wanted to be honest with him, and those feelings meant that someday, she would have to tell him. So she wanted to take stock of everything she had been through. However trying the past had been, she wanted to accept that they were simply memories of things that had transpired. She believed it was what she needed to do in order to look ahead and to move on. For herself, and for him as well.

There was something similar about the two of them. They were born and raised in worlds entirely separate, and lived lives that should never have found a way to one another—but a strange series of events had resulted in a miraculous meeting for the both of them. Because of that, she wanted to treasure the life they would share together.

Her eyes met with his—a dark magenta, beautiful like the evening sky. She leaned in close and they kissed. Their sighs entangled in the depths of it, and when their lips parted, they fell into a strong embrace.

“Shall we?”

Alec held out his hand, and she placed her own upon it. At her feet, Rurii wobbled joyfully.

“Yes, let’s.”

Hand in hand, they walked towards the door.

And to new days...

Interlude 1: Crying Party for the Brokenhearted

It was the fall of the fortress of Estervall.

The news spread through the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild in an instant, bringing tumult and commotion. Some stared at the ceiling in blank shock, while others slumped upon the floor in disbelief. Still others cried out in celebration.

“She did it! Shiori found a man! She fell in love!”

The joyful voice belonged to Marena, and it rang out through the hall as she jumped about excitedly, in a way most unbecoming for her thirty-odd years. Her husband, the magic swordsman Ludger, poked her in the side and reminded her that Shiori was no longer a little girl, but received only the butt of her spear in his gut for the comment. Still, the look on his face, too, was joyous (though it should be noted that it was not the poking of the spear that had brought about his happiness).

Shiori Izumi was, due to her manner and bearing, thought of as not unlike the fortress of Estervall—a natural fortress that, at a glance, boasted peaceful, scenic wonders for the eyes...and yet in actuality was a fearsome, impenetrable stronghold surrounded by muddy swamps of bottomless depth, lurking magical beasts, and natural traps that spelled death. And for those who had watched over her, seeing Shiori fall in love was indeed a joyous occasion.

It was not just that Shiori was a hard worker who had made great contributions to the Guild, but also that she was, above all, generous and selfless. It worried her friends to see her work herself to the bone, relying on nobody but herself as she struggled to make a living.

However, there were also those who had secretly longed for Shiori in their hearts, and these men could now be found slumped across tables. She was kind and she was gentle, and she did not slack in regards to her work. Her considerate nature and wondrous cooking abilities drew many a man's heart, and yet however perfect the men may have seemed, Shiori had not once yielded.

It was for this reason that many felt a certain reassurance, believing in the ideal that Shiori was so pure in her solitude that she might forever be a lone flower upon the peak of the highest mountain, and thus beyond the reach of any who would dare try for her hand. As such, none could have guessed that her heart could so easily have

been stolen by one who had known her for little more than three months.

It was heartbreak that had brought these men to tears.

For the immediate time being, Zack pretended not to hear any of the commotion, electing instead to busy himself with reports and various documentation. Clemens, for his part, stood rhythmically bashing his head against the wall.

“You okay, old man?” asked Linus jokingly.

“Old...man...” muttered Clemens in response.

The frequency of his head-bashing increased.

Such a delicate, fragile thing was the heart of a man just a few years from middle age.

“But who woulda thunk it’d be Master Alec, huh?” muttered Linus.

The fall of the impenetrable fortress that had so effortlessly repelled many an advance... The news had first leaked from Linus and the other adventurers who had been dispatched to Brovito Village.

According to them, Shiori had dropped the polite register of her speech and now spoke casually with Alec. According to them, even the way she said his name was different.

Upon first hearing these reports, many did not believe them. After all, not a single man had been able to talk their way into Shiori’s good graces for some four years. Then, of course, there was that horrid incident—an incident that had many believing she would never again open her heart.

And so everyone was sure they knew how the story would end. Even if he was good looking, and even if he was an A-ranker and a most appealing prospect—all the same, Alec was destined to fail.

Except that Shiori had, unexpectedly, showed signs of opening her heart to him, and then...

“They kissed in front of her apartment!”

“He stayed overnight with her yesterday! And people saw him leaving her apartment looking all *sorts* of satisfied!”

“Are you serious? He left in the morning? What a guy!”

And on it went. It was but once that the pair had kissed and shared an evening together, and though the truth of the matter was that Alec had merely nursed Shiori back to health, none of the adventurers at the Guild at that time had any way of knowing such facts.

At this point it should be mentioned that, although Zack had maintained his composure at the sound of the words “kissed,” upon hearing the words “left in the morning,” the papers he held were crushed in his hands and a fearsome look filled his eyes that very few were willing to meet.

However, none of the people absorbed in talk of the rumors noticed.

Clemens dragged his body slowly towards the window and turned his gaze to the scenery outside. At a glance, he looked like a handsome man lost in languid thoughts, but there was no life in the eyes that stared out at that scenery.

“Are you still hung up on it?” asked Nadia, her voice carrying a certain disbelief.

“Rurii! Is it true?!”

The men who still refused to believe what they’d heard clambered towards the solitary slime. The slime was occupied; it reached a feeler into the gaps between the shelves, pulled out something black, and swallowed it. Then it turned to the men.

“They kissed?!”

“He left in the morning?!”

The slime looked up at the men, then wobbled a gesture that could only be interpreted as a nod.

Wails ran through the Guild. Rurii was unsure if they were screams or battle cries, but simply returned to reaching between the shelves. Though some were curious as to exactly what the slime was doing, it is safe to say that there are some things in this world that are best left unknown.

Among all of this uproar were those who quietly hid their tears—the women who once had their hearts set on Alec. Though numerous beautiful women had approached him, he had never once succumbed, only ever replying with a glare as if he were regarding some kind of filth. As for the small subset of women with very particular preferences, who pined for Alec’s disdain and enjoyed writhing beneath his glare—well, the less said about them, the better.

In any case, it was a day of much heartbreak and many a tear shed over drinks.

“Drank himself to sleep. Again...”

Zack covered Clemens with a blanket, who had, at least on this occasion, managed to drag himself to one of the longer sofas before passing out. Zack brought a glass of wine to his lips and chuckled as he looked down at the sleeping figure.

“Give him some time and he’ll get over it.”

“Indeed,” said Nadia, taking a seat on the armrest of the sofa. “He’s a good-looking man, and there’s a cute girl waiting for him somewhere out there.”

She put a gentle hand to his mussed head of silver hair. He was a man with a fierce sex appeal, and a perfect balance of sweetness and indulgence. Many a woman had been captivated by Clemens, but he

had reached this age without ever taking one of them into his arms.

Come to think of it, it was a woman that forced him from his family too.

It was a tale Nadia had heard over drinks at some point. Clemens was the second son of a great merchant family with a long and storied history. Their clients included influential nobles and dukes.

Desiring this handsome second son's hand in marriage, the daughter of a particular merchant family had drugged his drink. Then she'd brought him to a room, alone, saying that she'd take care of him. It was clear she thought she could get what she wanted through physical means.

It was only because of Clemens's strong constitution and endurance that the incident ended without such a thing coming into play, but all the same the girl flew into an outrage about it, causing quite the scandal. Those who knew Clemens were skeptical of the girl's claims, but Clemens himself knew the scandal would harm the family business, old-fashioned and traditional as it was, and he made the decision to leave.

Ever since then, Clemens had a tendency to be careful about the alcohol he consumed, always tasting it to ensure that it was not tainted.

What a shame it is, in so many ways, for this to have happened to such a man.

Clemens himself seemed to pay the incident no mind, and having left the family business in the hands of his elder and younger brother, he appeared to thoroughly enjoy his capricious life of adventuring. However, it would seem that even those who appeared to have it all still had their struggles.

"And how about you, Zack?" asked Nadia, her thoughts returning to the present. "Always playing the role of the older brother."

"Huh?"

"You like to talk of brothers and sisters...but even you had feelings for her once, did you not?"

He did not deny it.

Instead, his response was, "A woman's instinct is a terrifying thing."

"How long have we known each other, Zack? You tried to hide it, but I knew you both liked her all along."

At some point, those protective feelings had turned to something deeper.

"It seems such a shame," Nadia said. "To think that you two were the closest to her, and yet neither of you ever said a word."

Zack gave a wry chuckle in response. He swirled the glass of wine in his hand, and the mellow scent of it drifted upwards.

“Me, Clemens...we couldn't protect her. We don't have a right to her hand,” he said.

“You don't make things easy on yourself...”

Due to Ranvald's scheming, Zack had been drowned in work, and because of that, he had not noticed Shiori being hurt, and how she had been driven towards death. That she survived at all could only be called good luck. He could not say he had saved her. And if he could not protect the woman he loved, then he did not deserve to have her.

So saying, Zack finished the rest of his wine.

But you know, Zack... She probably loved you too, once.

Being a woman herself, Nadia understood. Zack and Shiori had harbored feelings for one another, but never had the chance to confirm those feelings. And after the Akatsuki incident, the opportunity to do so was forever lost to them. Just how much of his heart had Zack locked away when he decided to become her brother? It pained Nadia to think of how they felt, deep in their hearts. She hoped that Shiori and Alec could be happy enough in the present to overcome the sad and painful decision that Zack and Shiori had been forced to make in the past.

“I think that in time, you too will find a nice girl,” said Nadia, putting her delicate fingers to Zack's cheek.

“What's this? You offering to comfort me?” said Zack with a grin.

He reached out with a rough hand and put a thumb to her crimson lips.

“Don't be daft,” said Nadia with a smile of her own. “You well know that I am faithful only to one.”

Even now, she clung to the memory of her fiancé, who had perished in an accident.

And yet, perhaps enough is enough...

Her lost love... No matter how long she held tight to him, he would not sleep any more peacefully.

Nadia twisted Zack's hand as it began to reach suspiciously for her behind, and she put her glass of wine to his lips.

The night is still far from over.

And the banquet for the heartbroken was no closer to ending either.

Interlude 2: A New Friend

“Well, we certainly had a lot to deal with...but all things considered, it was a worthwhile journey,” Olivier muttered, to nobody in particular.

He stared out at the snowy landscape as the carriage rocked from side to side. It had all started when he’d heard that Aleksey had collapsed from illness—he’d been entirely unable to sit still.

Upon seeing that his brother had recovered, however, Olivier had gone to inspect the refugee camps. Grasping the problems the kingdom faced firsthand was indeed meaningful. In the past, these inspections had been carried out by the supervisors of each related section, but there was only so much that could be learned from reports alone. So much simply did not make it into the reports Olivier received, and he knew the importance of seeing things with his own eyes.

It was truly fortunate that they had been able to inspect the northern camp when they did—many said it suffered the worst conditions, and the hard winter ahead would not make things any easier. Visiting allowed them to make practical, concrete plans for the establishment of temporary housing, securing medical staff and engineers, and confirming necessary supplies.

Olivier had also seen Aleksey looking unexpectedly at peace, and met the “celestial maiden” who healed his heart. The details of her face as well as her gentle nature were both things Olivier could never have learned from the reports he received. He now knew he could trust this woman with his older brother. Their meeting had been brief, and yet he came to like her enough to know as much as was necessary. She was a good woman.

“Your Majesty,” said Edvard, who was riding together with Olivier. “We’ll soon be passing Brovito Village. What would you like to do?”

The snow wolf attack upon the village of Brovito was unprecedented. Travelers to the village had been moved elsewhere, and a portion of the injured had also been delivered to better care. The rest could be left for Kristoffer to handle. Olivier’s most helpful course of action now was to get to the bottom of the fur merchants who had allowed the use of sleeping gas, and the noble family behind their business.

“I must admit I am curious, but we’ll maintain our current schedule. Perhaps we can take a break a short distance from the village so that we might observe it.”

These orders were given to the driver, and the carriage slowed as it passed by the entrance to the village, allowing a clear look at it. There were a large number of guardsmen at the entrance but no trouble of which to speak. It seemed the village was once again peaceful.

The carriage came to a halt in a snow field some ways from the village. It was a place used as a rest stop for caravans and merchants, and the nearby area was clear of snow and tamped down flat. Fortunately, on this particular occasion there were no other traveling parties but their own. They were in disguise, yes, but all the same they were glad to be free of any undue attention.

On the opposite side of them was the Blue Forest and the high road. They heard the occasional cry of winter birds, indicating that the smaller wildlife had returned to the forest. But there were also rare magical beasts, and so entrance to the forest was strictly limited.

Olivier’s knight troop of bodyguards settled themselves around the area while his attendants prepared tea. Edvard spoke to a few of the knights and returned.

“I’m sending these two knights to inspect the village.”

“Ah, very good.”

Edvard had assigned two exceptional and trustworthy knights—they were sure to pick up any information that could be of use.

The knights returned some twenty or thirty minutes later with a very satisfactory report, which covered the current state of the village itself, the number of people passing through the inns and shopping district, the arrangement of knights, and what supplies the village was lacking. The first aid camp had been taken down, and the injured waiting for transport to the capital were staying in one of the larger inns.

“The new captain of the garrison knights was previously vice-captain at a neighboring village. Goes by the name of Caspar Selander. He’s had experience working in the capital. Very capable sort, and much respected by his men.”

“And they’re expecting more reinforcements in the coming days, so it looks as though manpower won’t be an issue?”

“Indeed. However, their tourism trade took quite a hit. Even with the Nativity Festival this close, the number of tourists is practically nonexistent. It looks as if they’re starting some new initiatives to attract travelers, but to what extent it will help, we simply don’t know.”

Olivier’s eyes narrowed as he listened to the knight and Edvard.

“Hm? Some new initiatives, you say?”

“It’s a footbath, Your Majesty,” said one of the knights. “A bathing facility for only the feet. Apparently you can warm the body, recover from weariness, and all without removing your clothes. They’re able to use facilities and equipment that were already available, so they’ve already started constructing the bath itself.”

“According to the village, they learned of the concept from an adventurer—it’s from Eastern culture, apparently,” added the other knight.

Eastern. Olivier knew that Aleksey and his celestial maiden had been near Brovito, and he had to wonder if the suggestion was hers. He would save that particular line of investigation until later, though—for now, he was most curious about and much intrigued by the healing properties of the footbath. If it was useful, then it was something he wanted to implement.

Olivier knew that a nation’s stability relied on the health of its people. That was something his father had taught him. A country was its people, and no country could stand on its own if its people were not in sound health. Perhaps it would be worth installing one of these footbaths for the castle attendants—if it proved itself helpful, then they could be implemented in public facilities across the country.

“Hm... How very intriguing. We must visit again when things calm down.”

“Your Majesty,” said Edvard with something of a stern expression, which made it clear he did not want the king to be any more whimsical and capricious than he already was.

Olivier was the type of person who soon found his attention drawn to whatever piqued his curiosity. It was Edvard’s job to keep him in check, as the king liked to play the role of a traveler, going from place to place with a minimal security detail.

Edvard was the vice-captain of the Royal Knights, but he was not aiming for the top-ranking position of commander—rather, he wanted a position as Olivier’s aide. The reason was simple: he did not want riches or power. What he wanted was to be able to watch over Olivier. He had once said, “If we let him run free, who knows where he’ll disappear to and what trouble he’ll get himself into?” It was quite a thing to say about His Majesty, to be sure, but it was also true, so none argued the point.

The king’s current aides were, in fact, already moving to make Edvard’s desire a reality. The king’s restless nature worried them. On the one hand, to have the head of the famed Fauchelle military family as his aide inspired confidence, but on the other, there was no denying that it came with a certain fear—Edvard would be terrifying in the role of watching over the king.

Olivier told them all he was only joking, but at that moment a tension ran through the knights. Edvard already had a hand on his sword.

“Your Majesty—stand back!”

The king did as he was told, and saw the knights staring at a point in the distance. It was like a puddle had been plonked down in the middle of the pure white snowfield. The creeping peach-colored puddle moved in an odd manner, and approached them ever so slowly.

“It’s a slime!”

A peach-colored slime. They were numerous in the Blue Forest, and there were no records of them ever attacking humans. That was not to say they did not pose a threat, however. The slime was still a magical beast, after all—a creature quite beyond human reason.

The slime continued to approach them, ever so slowly. Edvard unsheathed his sword and held it at the ready. Seeming to understand that it was being seen as a threat, the slime stopped in place, trembling at its edges.

Then, it shook into a jump of sorts and transformed itself from a puddle into a half-sphere—sort of dumpling-shaped. The bodyguards were stunned by the unexpected development, but Olivier and Edvard were not. The two men exchanged a glance—they had seen this very thing just recently.

“It seems impossible but...do you suppose it knows Rurii?”

Rurii, of course, was the name of the celestial maiden’s friend. The peach-colored slime appeared to hear the whispered question, and wobbled as if to confirm that it did indeed. Showing no signs of enmity, it then bounced around happily. All the same, the knights did not let their guards down, and glanced at Edvard for orders.

Olivier gestured with a hand for them to stand down, and approached the slime.

“Your Majesty! It’s dangerous!”

“I’ll be fine...probably.”

It was only instinct—but Olivier had faith in his instincts. This slime was no enemy.

“What do you mean *probably*?!”

Edvard cried out in disbelief. Olivier ignored him. He drew closer to the slime, and when their gazes met—though to be sure, Olivier was unsure if the slime had a gaze, so to speak—he knelt down.

“Are you one of Rurii’s friends?” he asked.

The peach-colored slime trembled an answer. It was just as Olivier had expected.

“And do you know Shiori too?”

Once more, the slime trembled.

“Aha. Then perhaps you have also met Aleksey? Oh—he may have gone by the name Alec. He has chestnut brown hair, and eyes the same color as my own.”

According to the report they’d received from the Intelligence Division’s external support personnel, Aleksey had accompanied Shiori on a trip back to her slime’s home. If this slime was a friend or acquaintance of Rurii, it may well have met them both.

And once again, the slime trembled an answer. Olivier laughed.

“Amazing. Effective communication with a slime. Just like Rurii, you’re a smart one, aren’t you?”

The slime understood that it was being praised, and bobbed side to side happily.

“May I touch you?”

The slime nodded, and Olivier reached out a hand. Unable to simply stand back and let this happen, Olivier’s bodyguards called out warnings, while Edvard cut in between the king and the slime.

“Your Majesty. It’s far too dangerous. This is not the celestial maiden’s familiar.”

“It’s fine, Edvard. I don’t sense a hint of enmity from it.”

“Be that as it may, I beg that you consider your position. If anything should happen to you—”

“Oh, don’t be such a worrywart.”

“Listen to me, Olivier, you idiot!”

Olivier was being stubborn, and Edvard’s patience had run dry. Gone were the polite words one spoke to a king. Edvard had always been like this, though. He couldn’t control how he spoke whenever he got emotional. It was the rough and rude tone of voice he’d inherited from his beloved half-brother, Zack.

The slime appeared nervous and worried by the outburst before it, and Olivier softly put a hand to its surface to reassure it that everything would be okay.

“Ah, yes! This feeling! There’s no mistaking it! This slime is indeed a friend of Rurii’s!”

“There’s no way you could possibly know that from a mere touch!”

“But it’s so firm and bouncy to the touch! And warm, like an infant! And plump, like a voluptuous woman’s supple breasts! It *must* be one of Rurii’s friends!”

“*That’s* how you’re judging this slime?!”

At the sudden outbreak of an argument between the king and his subject, Olivier’s bodyguards could do little but shrug and sigh, knowing that whenever these quarrels started, they did not end quickly. It seemed that for Olivier and Edvard, these childish fights were a kind of stress relief—especially for Olivier, who always

appeared to be on the receiving end of their tussles. There were few, if any, in the entire kingdom with whom he could argue so freely.

In any case, as the two argued, Edvard also lowered his defenses, and it became clear the slime was no real threat. As such, some even began to place their swords back in their scabbards.

“How long do you think they’ll keep going for?” asked one knight to another.

“Who knows...?”

They watched as Olivier, completely taken by the peach-colored slime, tried to feed it. He created some magic water just as his brother had taught him and gave it to the slime.

“Wait,” said Edvard. “Don’t you dare tell me you’re thinking about taking that home with you.”

“Well, that all depends on what the slime wants, doesn’t it?”

“*Olivier!*”

Olivier patted the slime as it happily drank the water he’d given it. By this point, he practically had the slime wrapped in his arms.

“You know we can’t take that home with us.”



“I...I suppose not...”

Everyone stared off into the distance, already predicting what was about to occur in the very near future.

And so it was that their predictions proved entirely correct.

Some ten minutes later:

The snow carriage finally resumed its journey, and inside of it, a wholeheartedly satisfied Olivier sat with a peach-colored slime upon his lap. Across from him, Edvard sat, staring with the sternest look on his face that Olivier had ever known.

“I must say, this truly has been a most meaningful journey,” said Olivier.

“Well, isn’t *that* wonderful,” muttered Edvard.

“Oh, yes. We must give it a name.”

Olivier’s voice bubbled with joy, and the slime trembled with excitement.

“Given your color, how about...Persikka?”

“Lacks originality, don’t you think?”

“Very well—we’ll shorten it to Pel.”

“You’re not even trying!”

Interlude 3: The Diary of Pel, the Familiar

■ November ☐☐

The lapis-colored slime that once left the forest is returning, so everyone is gathering for the occasion. This will be the second time our lapis-colored kin has returned home. It was quite the surprise to see it together with humans, but we were assured they were friends. The slime even received a name: Rurii. Names feel special. I bet it must be nice to have one.

Brethren came from all over to gather in the specified location. There was still time before the lapis-colored slime arrived, so we played games while we waited. It was so hard to decide what to play—we'd learned hide-and-seek and tag from spying on humans, but in the end we went with good old-fashioned river rafting. We all jumped in and flowed down the river, from the forest to a nearby village, then got out. From there, the game was to run away without being seen. Sometimes you do get spotted by a human, but dashing away as fast as you can is part of the thrill and the fun.

When we rafted today, a green slime was almost spotted, but it managed to get away by blending in with the grass. The grass had withered so the colors were all different, but I guess it escaped because that human had poor eyesight or something.

I had so much fun. I can't wait to do it again.

■ November ☐☐

Rurii returned home. It came with two friends: Shiori and Alec. Apparently, Alec is a prospective contender for the role of Shiori's mate. Wow! The more you know!

Rurii looked well. It seemed even smoother and bubblier than before. Maybe it's because of the magic water. Everyone was really jealous, and we all quivered about it. It sounds nice. I wish I could drink some of that water.

■ November ☐☐

Rurii is going back to town again. Everyone asked Shiori for a taste of her magical water, and she let us have some. Alec was on guard when he first saw us, but we tried to look cute and beg, just like Rurii taught us. After that, it was okay. Apparently humans have a soft

spot for cute things. It took some time to get used to holding that cute form, though. But I did my best because I wanted a taste of that water.

The water was really sweet and delicious! I wanted to drink more, but Shiori doesn't have much magical power, so she gets tired when she tries to make too much. But Alec made us all some water too. His water is powerful with a hint of sweetness to it. Shiori's water is super delicious, but I think I prefer Alec's.

After we'd finished with the water, it was time for Rurii to go. We all said our goodbyes and went our separate ways.

Afterwards, I felt a commotion deep, deep in the forest. I wonder if something happened.

■ November ☐☐

I received contact from another of my peach-colored brethren. A big group of humans came in caravans and spread some weird smell around. Then they took the pregnant snow wolves. The rest of the snow wolves are furious. They're chasing down the humans.

■ November ☐☐

The snow wolves have returned. I was glad to see that the female snow wolves are safe. Unfortunately, many snow wolves sacrificed their lives for the sake of the pack. They attacked the village that the bad humans had run to, and were attacked in return. It was humans who captured the snow wolves, but it was humans who released them too. I guess they're like magical beasts: some are good, and some are bad.

Still, I was surprised. The snow wolves are really strong. Humans must be pretty tough.

■ November ☐☐

We saw humans running through the forest. According to our lapis-colored kin, they're the humans who attacked the snow wolves' turf. They'd heard about this from Rurii. We decided to hand the humans over to the snow wolves.

Slimes gathered from around the forest. Some of them also reached out to the snow wolves for us, so they were waiting when we brought the humans for their judgment. We handed the humans over, and then everything ended nice and neatly.

Still... How stupid of those humans. If you harm the forest, it's only natural that you're going to pay the price for it when you next return.

■ November ☐☐

I had a feeling that something good was going to happen, so while

I was wandering the forest I ventured pretty close to a human village. I know I should keep further away, especially in the winter—I stand out so much in the snow.

I saw a carriage in the distance that had stopped. I had a feeling something good would happen over there, so I got closer, and then a group of humans almost attacked me. However, I remembered what Rurii taught me—I made myself look cute and didn't show any signs of being a threat. The power of cuteness is just out of this world, seriously.

A blond-haired human approached me together with one who had light brown hair. He knew Rurii too. He asked me about Shiori and Alec. Something about that human was very similar to Alec. I wonder if they are brethren.

The blond-haired human was very happy. He was overjoyed when I let him touch me. And he gave me magic water too. It was powerful but with a light sweetness. I could tell right then that this human was indeed Alec's brethren. Their water tasted the same. Super delicious. I must have looked happy to drink the water because he made me a lot of it.

If I stay with this human, perhaps I can drink magical water every day, just like Rurii. Just as I was thinking that I wanted to be that human's friend, he took me with him. But first he told me that he lived far away, so maybe I couldn't visit home very often. As long as I was okay with that, he'd be happy to take me.

I was totally okay with it! I mean, if I get lonely I can just contact my peach-colored brethren for a long-distance chat. But the human also said that he will make sure I can visit home, though it might not be often.

“Starting today, your name is Pel. Nice to meet you, Pel.”

He gave me a name! I can't wait to brag about it to my brethren.

My new friend's name is Olivier. The human with him is his friend, Edvard. They both live in the royal capital. I wonder what it's like. I'm super excited!

Interlude 4: The Diary of Rurii, the Familiar

■ November ☐☐

There have been more people in town recently. Some festival or another, meaning lots of sightseers. Everything is beautifully decorated, and there's lots of delicious food around. I wonder if there's such a thing as roasted giant spiders? They'd be so tasty if you roasted them. All hard and crunchy on the outside, but then on the *inside*...

Oh, that reminds me. If there are more people around, then I guess I should be more careful about clearing out the vermin...

"Ugh, I can't stop shivering..." I heard Zack say. "Wonder if I caught a cold?"

Looks like that might be the case, I thought, watching him. He's not as young as Alec, so I hope he takes better care of himself.

"Oi, you," he said, when he noticed me watching him. "You were thinking something rude just now, weren't you?"

It's just your imagination, Zack, I swear.

■ November ☐☐

Today we helped out lots of people who were lost. Lots of weird people, though. They stared at Shiori and they got all touchy-feely with me. This group of three creeps tried to take Shiori somewhere and I was just about to eat the lot of them when a knight appeared and took them away.

The first two people we helped were easily the weirdest though. They weren't scared of me being a slime, and they touched me a lot. But they didn't have any bad intentions. They smelled like Alec and Zack. Had the same aura too. The blond-haired one of the pair wrapped Shiori in a hug. What a shock! Shiori looked flustered... Maybe I should have stopped him.

■ November ☐☐

Tonight I had dinner at The Tree of Familiars. I *love* that they have a menu for magical beasts. I highly recommend the rabbit gilet stew and skewers. Nothing goes to waste—they even use the blood in the stew. Man, talk about knowing your stuff. The owner knows what familiars like, being a magic swordsman and all.

Shiori and Alec were still having dinner when I finished my meal,

so I went to the hangout spot for familiars to play with the others. Ended up just chatting with the blizzard cat Sigurd and the airola bat Krista. Well, I say “chat,” but it was pretty much just a Sigurd complain-fest.

Sigurd’s owner is a mage, and a bit of a wack job. They started working out just in case they ever ran out of magic, so now it’s not just magic they’re passionate about, but also bodybuilding and self-defense. Apparently, Sigurd’s owner hides a pretty impressive body underneath their cloak.

But now it seems they’re getting *too* into the bodybuilding, and it’s having a weird effect on their spells. Like they have this “Meteo Strike” where they break the ground with a magically powered fist, and a “Wind Cutter” where they shoot magical energy out of the palm of their hand. It all sounds pretty troublesome. I mean, at that point it’s like it’s not even magic anymore—it’s more like that internal “ki” power Shiori has told me about before.

According to Sigurd, their owner is so obsessed they’re thinking about changing jobs.

Then again, Sigurd is a bit of a wack job too. The wings on its back have atrophied so it can’t fly, but apparently Sigurd tried anyway. By focusing magical energy into its feet, it lifted its body off the ground.

But is *that* even magic? Sounds a lot like “ki” if you ask me...

■ November ☐☐

I’m going home soon. Yay!

I got in touch with my lapis-colored brethren right away. They’re going to tell the others for me. We’ll all play together. Can’t wait!

■ November ☐☐

Today’s the day I go back home!

I was so fired up I could barely sleep. Yesterday morning, I was super excited and practically bouncing off the walls, so by the time night fell I was pretty deflated. I jumped in the bath for a soak and fell asleep. When I woke up, it was morning and time to go. Crazy!

■ November ☐☐

Shiori is getting along really well with Alec. Her aura has softened a little, which is good. For humans, words are really important—I can’t use them, so there are limits to how much comfort I can provide.

I saw my slime kin and they all looked well. They said they were jealous because of how much smoother and bubblier I look. Must be thanks to Shiori’s magic water.

We played all day. We played tag, we played hide-and-seek, and I

tremble-bragged about the most delicious stuff I'd eaten recently. I think it's going to be an all-nighter. I wanted to go river rafting, but it turned out they'd already gone. Next time, I guess.

Some of the slimes crept up to Shiori and Alec, intrigued by the way they were hugging each other. I pulled those slimes aside and told them that if they're going to watch, they have to be sneakier about it.

■ November ☐☐

We're going home today.

Everyone wanted a taste of Shiori's magic water before we left. They all begged, and because Shiori is so kind, she said she'd do it...so then all the slimes surrounded her and Alec, and Alec kind of freaked out.

That's why I told them that you have to look cute!

When the slimes finally did cute-ify themselves, it was all okay. Shiori made a little water for everyone. Alec helped too, and the slimes were super happy. One of the peach-colored slimes was really into Alec's magic water. After we all had a drink, it was time to go.

See you all again soon!

Later, I felt something like a disturbance or commotion in the depths of the forest.

I wonder if something happened.

■ November ☐☐

Whooooooooooooo, the snow wolves are running wiiiiiiiiild!

I tried asking them what was up, but they were so berserk with rage that it wasn't any use. They attacked Shiori and Alec, and they attacked the village too.

Shiori took to the rooftops to stay safe. Alec and I fought together. We make a good team. Come to think of it, if he wanted to, he could probably make a magical contract with a slime, I think.

■ November ☐☐

The snow wolves were mad because some humans kidnapped their pregnant mates. Who wouldn't be mad about that? It wasn't the villagers who did it, though—it was outsiders from somewhere else.

With Shiori's help, all of the kidnapped wolves were released. Because of that, the snow wolves left peacefully, but the village still suffered. That's unsurprising—they had to face off against a whole pack of furious snow wolves, after all.

The humans who made the wolves mad were caught by the knights. I think the best thing for them is to accept their human judgment and punishment. But just as I was thinking about this, I

realized that Shiori was injured! Those damned thug humans got to her. I never even noticed. It's a bad injury too.

What do I do? I couldn't protect her...

I might have to find the filthy humans that did it and eat them.

■ November ☐☐

Ellen healed Shiori's injury. Didn't even leave a scar. Thanks, Ellen!

Unfortunately, Shiori's old scars can't be healed. Alec was shocked to find out about them. And Shiori cried a river. Did you know humans can injure their hearts? It seems like it's much harder to heal a wound to the heart than a wound to the body. The elderly slime in the sewers taught me that.

Shiori and Alec talked a lot, though, and they're even closer now. I'm really happy.

Just a few more steps and they'll be mates!

■ November ☐☐

I received word from one of my lapis-colored brethren. Some humans were captured in the forest. When they showed me, I knew they were the thugs that had kidnapped the snow wolves.

Those idiots ran straight into the forest. I told my brethren that if they were going to serve themselves up on a platter like this, then why not just hand them over to the snow wolves? Soon as they heard about it, the snow wolves came running. It was clear that they wanted their revenge all for themselves.

■ November ☐☐

Shiori has a fever. I went to get Alec and he's staying tonight to look after her. I hope she gets well soon.

■ November ☐☐

Shiori's fever is dying down. It's like the time Alec caught a fever—it's nothing serious, so that's good.

Shiori felt good in the morning, so she got up early to make breakfast. I tried to stop her because she only just recovered from her fever, but she never listens to me about these things. As expected, Alec wasn't too happy about it either. She broke her promise so he left some kind of mark on her.

Then all of a sudden Alec started to panic. He asked me to cool his head for him, so I was going to throw some water at him but then he stopped me. What a letdown. I thought we could play, like a splash fight or something. Maybe he prefers snow.

■ November □□

Shiori is making portable foods today, so I went out by myself.

First I went to Marius and Bertil's shops and did some bug extermination. Then, when I was out wandering about, I bumped into Clemens. He'd just bought some liquor and was on his way home. He managed to get his hands on some rare Eastern stuff, so he showed it to me.

The drink was called "A hundred million years of solitude."

I really hope he gets over this soon...

■ November □□

I got word from my slime kin. A peach-colored slime made friends with a human and is going to the royal capital. It even has a name that it was bragging about: Pel. I totally get that—it feels good to have a name!

Pel's new friend is called Olivier, and he's Alec's brother. He has blond hair, dark magenta eyes, and a similar aura to Alec's... Come to think of it, he might be the guy Shiori and I met not too long ago.

Pel said it might want to ask for my help if it doesn't understand human life and behavior. I hope we can share our findings with each other. So much to look forward to!

Interlude 5: Shiori's New Diary

■ ○ Month, □ Day

How many days have I been here now...? About two years and nine months, I think?

Akatsuki disbanded. Rachel died. Ranvald was fired and moved elsewhere. I really believed he was a good person, but he used the party because he was money-hungry.

The little money that I'd managed to save since arriving here is gone, but today I received all the money and experience points that had been kept from me up till now. I was even promoted to C-rank. The assessment records were tampered with, so when they were recalculated, it was revealed that I'd passed C-rank long ago.

I'm so glad... At least this gives me a chance to start over.

Also, I finally have something like a family here now. Zack said he'll be my big brother.

It makes me happy...but also a little sad.

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Today I started work again. Zack said it was still too early, but I really wanted to get back to it. I don't have any of my real family here, and I never want to feel the terror of being penniless. Not ever again. I lost all my personal belongings and my old diary too. I'm starting everything over from scratch. But perhaps it's best that I lost that diary. I think the last entries in it were all very depressing.

First of all, I registered Rurii as a familiar. Rurii looks like it'll get along just fine with the other familiars. We'll do our best together, as a team!

You know, sometimes I see Rurii scratching around in the space between the shelves. I wonder what that slime is up to?

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Finished up a new piece of magic equipment. Managed to imitate the freeze-dry food process with it. I'll ask the others to taste-test the results for me.

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Every day is so busy and fulfilling. I barely even have time to write in this diary. But I think this is just right for me. Whenever I'm

too idle, I start thinking too much.

Tomorrow I'll head out on an expedition. It's been quite a while since I last went out on one. It's only a small outing, though—a single night. Hope it goes well.

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Today I was promoted to B-rank. What a surprise. I'm just so happy that my hard work is paying off. I'm going to move into a new apartment soon.

■ ○ Month, □ Day

I'm taking part in a difficult expedition—manticore suppression. I've seen one once before, but wow...they're terrifying to look at...

I met the members of the party today. There was Clemens, who I've been on a few expeditions with, then Linus and Ellen, who I'll be working with for the first time. They're both very skilled adventurers, I hear. Then there's Alec, who is an old friend of Zack's. He just got back from a long-term request that took several years. He's very strong, apparently. He looked at me with a very stern expression on his face—most likely because I'm Eastern and because he doesn't know what a housekeeping mage is.

In any case, all I have to do is what I always do—just give it my best!



“What are you looking at?”

Alec peeked over Shiori's shoulder to get a better look at her diary. Shiori covered it with a hand, embarrassed, then remembered that it was written in Japanese and relaxed.

“It's my diary,” she said. “I write in it every now and again.”

“Oh... Is this your native language? What interesting letters. It almost looks like some kind of code.”

Alec's eyes spun at the lines of hiragana and kanji on the page, but he was very intrigued by it all.

“I'd die of embarrassment if anyone read it, so I write it in my native language,” said Shiori.

“Oh...? It's embarrassing?”

A cheeky grin rose to Alec's face as he ran a fingertip along a line of characters.

“What do you write about?” he asked.

“Just my everyday life. I think the last thing I wrote about was the first time we met.”

Alec's curiosity was piqued by the words, and it was Shiori's turn

to flash him a cheeky grin.

“I wrote that you were a very stern-looking person who eyed me with suspicion,” she said.

“Ugh... Did I really look so serious?”

“You did.”

“So I didn’t leave a good first impression, then...”

Shiori had only told the truth, but Alec fell silent. His expression had darkened like he’d eaten something disagreeable. But Alec hadn’t been the first to treat her that way—Shiori was used to people being suspicious when they met her, and she’d learned to not worry herself about it. Still, she’d never imagined that Alec would grow interested in her, and that many days of courtship would soon follow. He’d grown closer to her, wrapped her in his arms, listened to her stories, and...

Shiori reached out and placed her lips on Alec’s dejected-looking face. His eyes widened in surprise.

“You were a bit scary at first,” she admitted. “But now I know how kind you are.”

His dark magenta eyes narrowed into a soft smile, and he pulled her in with his strong arms and wrapped her in a hug. He brought his lips to her ears and she giggled at the ticklish sensation.

“In that case, perhaps next time you’ll write something nice about me?”

“Yep.”

She was certain that she would be writing more and more about the warm feelings she held for a certain someone. She no longer wanted to write of lonely days, of losing things important to her, as she had in the past. Now she wanted to write something new—she wanted to write about her hopes for the future.

Shiori closed her eyes and sunk into the warmth of the embrace that enfolded her. The lips that descended to kiss her in that moment were warm and kind, and so very, very sweet.

Interlude 6: The Story of a Certain Prince and His Father

1

He felt listless and sleepy, but his body ached and sleep refused to come.

Aleksey tossed and turned in bed. He'd lost count of how many times he'd done this. The damp towel that had been placed on his forehead had long since fallen off, and finding it again was far too much of a bother.

He turned in bed once more and gazed out the window. Snow fell heavily. The adults of the castle said that this was just the beginning—that this snow marked the start of a long winter.

"I was really looking forward to today..." Aleksey muttered.

The original plan had been to visit Olivier's secret place, but they'd had to put it off because of the snow and Aleksey's fever.

"It's so...hot..."

The servants looking after Aleksey came by periodically to check on him, but otherwise made themselves scarce. This was because he'd asked to be alone unless he called for them—he still wasn't used to living a life where people who were not his family were always by his side.

But in truth, he was lonely.

"Mom..."

She had been so kind. She had always taken the day off work to stay with him when he was unwell. She'd held his hand, put a reassuring palm to his forehead, and set him at ease. She'd told him softly that everything would be fine. When she was with him, he could sleep.

But now his mother was gone. She had always been of weak constitution, but she had fallen sick. It was not a sickness that anyone should have died from, and yet just like that, it took her from him.

Tears fell from the young boy's eyes. He'd tried so hard to hold them back since the day he'd arrived at the castle. But no matter how much he wiped them away, the tears kept coming. He thrust his face into his pillow and he sobbed.

And when he finally tired of the tears, he fell into slumber.

Aleksey awoke to the sound of someone pulling his blanket over him. They put a hand to his forehead and felt around his eyes. It was a man, looking down at him from his bedside—a man with blond hair and dark magenta eyes. He was a vision of how Olivier would look when he grew up.

“Da... Father,” Aleksey uttered.

“When we’re by ourselves, just us family, you can call me dad.”

The man smiled with a certain awkwardness, then soaked the towel that had fallen from Aleksey’s head and wrung it out. He put it back on his son’s forehead and took a seat by his side.

“I hear you haven’t eaten.”

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

The servants had brought him soup and porridge on a few occasions, but Aleksey simply couldn’t stomach it. He didn’t want it. He felt he would only bring it all back up again, and he was sure it would cause everyone much more trouble than him not eating at all.

“There’s no need to apologize. Nobody’s going to blame you for being unwell. However, Olivier is very worried about you.”

“He is?”

Aleksey’s father mustered a worried smile. Sometimes Olivier wore the exact same expression.

“Indeed. The boy was practically in tears. He fears that if you do not eat, you will die.”

For his part, Aleksey did not think he would die of a mere fever and lack of appetite.

“Olivier has already lost two of his older brothers. He fears that he may lose you also.”

Olivier’s two brothers... Aleksey had heard that some months ago they had been lost, one after the other, to unfortunate accidents. Olivier had looked up to them both. Aleksey remembered the commotion at the loss of the royal prince, but he still couldn’t grasp that his brother was a prince, let alone the fact that he was one himself. How could he possibly come to terms with the idea that his father was the king?

“But I won’t die,” said Aleksey. “It’s just a fever. I’ll eat as soon as I feel better.”

“And I believe you.”

Aleksey and his father shared a grin. He had first thought of his father as a cold, scary man, but Olivier had told him that was how he was when he was king. And Olivier had been right, for when the man was with family, he felt no different than any other ordinary man. He was the very portrait of the father that Aleksey had always dreamed of.

“However, if you do not eat *something*, you may well not get

better. So...”

Aleksey’s father passed over a glass bowl from the bedside table, inside of which was a pure white—

“Ice cream!”

“I’ve been told it’s your favorite. Perhaps you’ll be able to stomach a little of this?”

“Yes!”

It was a cold, sweet dessert that he’d first tried upon arriving at the castle. It was delicious, but it was only served every once in a while, because eating too much of it could cause chills. Aleksey sat up eagerly and hungrily. His father laughed.

“Calm yourself and lie back. I’ll feed you.”

“Oh... Yes, dad.”

Sitting up had taken more energy than the young Aleksey expected, and he did as his father told him. Soon, a spoonful of ice cream melted in his mouth, cold and sweet.

“So good...”

It felt like a long time since he’d been this happy. His father smiled in return.

“Be sure you keep this a secret from Olivier. He’ll want some for himself if he hears about it. That, and I snuck this out of the kitchen myself. If the chef hears about it, he’ll be very mad.”

The man wore a guilty smile. It was exactly the same as Olivier’s smile when he was up to some trick or another.

This was his father, who had left him and his mother all on their own. He was the man that had caused their hardships, and let Aleksey’s mother die. The boy could not let go of these feelings. Still could not forgive his father.

But he’s exactly like mom said.

She’d said that he seemed strict and coldhearted, but was in fact a loving and interesting man.

“Dad...”

“Yes?”

“Did you love my mom?”

As he held the spoon out, his father’s face hardened. He glanced at Aleksey, then turned his gaze to the window for a time.

“I did. I loved her so very much.”

“More than the queen?”

But his father responded to this only with an awkward chuckle.

“To tell you the truth, I had wanted to make your mother my wife. However, there were our social standings to consider. Those around us did not want it, nor did your mother. And before I realized it, she was gone.”

Aleksey wanted to say something, but no words came to him. His

father looked so sad, as if on the verge of tears. Upon his arrival at the castle, Aleksey had come to understand that, for kings and princes, there were certain difficult and unavoidable “rules.” Here, now, he also understood that it was these “rules” that had kept his mother from staying with his father. They loved each other, and yet they could not be together—the tragedy of it struck the young Aleksey.

But then... Why was I born?

No matter how much he thought about it, no answer came. Perhaps he would understand when he grew up. His father silently brought the spoon once more to his mouth, and Aleksey silently ate the ice cream.

After a time, the bowl was empty. Aleksey’s mouth felt cold. He felt like his fever had dropped, if only a little. His body felt a little at ease, and he grew drowsy. His eyelids felt heavy. As he started to nod off, his father put a hand to his head, just like his mother used to.

“And now, sleep. It is the best remedy for a tired body. Sleep well, and you will be better in no time.”

“Okay.”

Aleksey’s father pulled the covers up to his son’s shoulders, and ruffled his hair. Aleksey felt him move towards the door. He heard the door begin to open, then pause.

“In the end, I could not be with the woman I loved, but I pray that you may live happily, married to a woman you adore with all of your heart.”

After these quiet words, the door shut. Footsteps faded into the distance. The words floated into Aleksey’s ears and he fell into slumber.

2

Robert walked the quiet corridors with the empty bowl in hand. He felt glad that he passed no one as he went, for right now, at this moment, he looked not like the king of a nation, but like any other man who called it home. Even now, that bittersweet romance burned in his heart—a love that was never to be.

Jessica.

A girl he had loved from the depths of his heart. She was of low standing among the castle attendants, the youngest daughter of a baron. She was not showy. She was gentle, and Robert was drawn to her honest and unpretentious personality. He felt healed in her presence. Their feelings grew as they met in secret, but it was not to be—they were of differing status, and he was the nation’s only prince. He would not be allowed to take her as his wife.

Robert’s mother had been sickly and weak, and it was all she

could do to even give birth to Robert. Many told the king—Robert's father—to take a mistress or concubine of better health so he could produce many potential heirs, but the man refused. He loved Robert's mother deeply, and stubbornly refused to even entertain the idea. His father's love for his wife was a precious thing.

But the king had never thought that it would be his only son who would be made to pay the price for his decision.

If Robert had had brothers, he could perhaps have conceded his place on the throne to one of them. But he did not, and so he was afforded no freedom with regards to marriage. It was his responsibility, for the future prosperity of the kingdom, to marry a woman who was healthy, appropriately educated, with the makings of a future queen and the status that would ensure support of the nation's future endeavors.

That Robert's father was allowed to marry the woman he loved came down to coincidence—she also happened to be the daughter of a duke. However, Jessica was but the daughter of a lower-class noble. She had been raised freely in the countryside, and had neither the necessary education nor determination—she held no ambitions of ever becoming queen.

“From the very bottom of my heart, I am nothing but humbled before your feelings,” she had said. “There is no greater joy for me than knowing you hold me in such a regard. However, your standing and position is far too heavy a weight for me to carry.”

Those were the words she had spoken at their final rendezvous, and then within a few days she was gone. Part of it was pressure from those within the castle who sensed what was going on, but mostly it was the decision of Jessica herself, who had no desire to weigh Robert down.

In return, Robert settled his mind on his future, just as Jessica had settled her own upon their parting. He did this because he loved his country as much as he loved her. He could have pursued her, it was true. But to do so would mean throwing away his rank and plunging the country into a power struggle. He simply could not allow that to happen.

And so Robert locked away his feelings for Jessica, and met with several women until he found and selected the one who would make an appropriate wife. And this woman, too, he came to love, just as she came to love him. He hoped that somewhere out there, Jessica had also come to find love and happiness.

However...

“Who could have thought she would choose to remain faithful only to me, and end up in the care of the monastery...?”

Some ten years after they parted, Robert met Jessica again. It was on an inspection of the western territories—he found her quite by chance, taking care of children at an orphanage. She said that upon leaving the castle, she had also left home.

Jessica had been allowed these certain selfish choices in her life—her elder brother was inheriting the family's noble title, and her sisters had also married into good families. Since leaving home for the monastery, she had lived a frugal life. She had also remained a virgin, saying that she had given herself entirely to the service of God.

"I ask of you this one selfish request...this one evening. I beg of you."

Jessica had asked him that they spend one night together.

"In my work with children, I long to hold my own in these arms. I promise you that whatever happens, I will never make trouble for the kingdom. Please..."

In hindsight, it was a reunion that neither could have ever imagined. Not Robert, and not Jessica. Why had they chosen to bring their bodies together as one, when so long ago they had resigned themselves to lives apart? They spent the evening lost in one another, as if passionately making up for all the time they had spent apart.

As a result, Jessica got what she longed for and became pregnant, with a child that would have but one parent. Robert met this son only once—Jessica wanted to raise him as an ordinary child, which meant keeping him sequestered away from any chance that he might be used for political reasons. To keep the birth a secret, Jessica left the monastery before her pregnancy became obvious and moved to Tris. Robert had wanted to provide her the money to raise the child and to live well, but she had refused all of these offers. He had even offered to bring her into the castle as a mistress, but she had refused that also, just as he knew she would.

In part, it was likely Jessica's way of showing her care for him, but perhaps it had also been her stubborn determination as a woman.

"There are women in this world who, even if marriage is out of the question, desire a child who inherits the blood of a union."

Thus spoke Frederick Fauchelle, confidante of Robert and another man who had fathered a child out of wedlock. As a man who had walked this path before, this was his opinion.

"I cannot fathom such feelings, but...you are saying that Bleyzac's mother felt likewise?"

Frederick had responded with a wry chuckle.

"Unfortunately, no. In my case the birth was purely an accident. I was but a young man, and an inexperienced one at that. I'd met her in the evening, and after a few drinks, one thing simply led to another."

“Not like you at all, that...”

“The alcohol was not entirely to blame. It was something of a pointless gesture, in some respects—merely a way for the two of us to share in the dissatisfaction of our individual circumstances. She with regards to the partner she was betrothed to, and me with the frustration I held at being unable to live up to the expectations of my father and grandfather. We both had our reasons.”

And those reasons resulted in a pregnancy. But it was not something that could be swept under the rug as the mere carelessness of youth. Frederick admitted with a heavy heart and much regret that he was nothing but sorry for what had happened to both woman and child. Because of their tryst, the girl had married a different man, and her son—whom Frederick had not been told about—was sent to an orphanage. They suffered greatly, while Frederick himself escaped with only a mere scolding.

“In this world, the true burden of a problem always falls hardest on those who are weakest—the women and the children,” he said.

Robert had respected Jessica’s wishes, though to ensure she lived without too much issue, he pulled some strings to aid her in her search for work. Though Jessica and her child would not live lavishly, Aleksey would be raised healthy and among kind people, and mother and son would live happily together.

When he thought of it now, however, Robert wished he had pressured Jessica to move into one of his villas. Their life did not have to be filled with luxury, but if he had only been able to provide for them such that they lived without issue, then perhaps Jessica may have lived to an older age. And perhaps Aleksey would not have had to lose the mother he loved so dearly.

“Burdens...” Robert muttered.

There was no doubt that the burden placed on Jessica was great—she had gone from living without care to struggling among the kingdom’s commoners, without the support of others. She had lived austere at the monastery, then thrown herself into the lifestyle of a commoner together with her child. For a woman to raise a child alone while working to support them both—the cumulative weight of it all would have eaten away at her health. And eat away it did—the weakly Jessica passed away before Aleksey had even turned ten.

It just so happened that at the same time, Robert himself lost two sons, one after the other—the first and second princes—to unfortunate accidents. So overcome with grief was the queen that she remained bedridden for quite some time. Robert was left to deal with his grief while still juggling his official responsibilities. He did not have the time to even glance at the updates that came to him about a “certain

mother and son,” and so it was not until some months later that he became aware of Jessica’s death, and Aleksey’s transfer to an orphanage.

Frederick’s words had rung entirely true: the burden had fallen hardest on those who were weakest.

Robert had put his responsibilities as king so far forward that he had neglected the mother and son who lived outside his kingdom. As a husband, and as a father, he had failed to support them. And there was no greater irresponsibility, he felt, than not realizing when the life of the two of them together had suddenly been whittled down to one.

Jessica had denied all support, adamant about living independently as mother and son, but she had been unaware of the dangers of this act. She had not realized what would happen to her son in the event that she passed away before he was able to live on his own.

“We failed as his parents...both she and I.”

These bitter memories burned like flames in his heart. In the end, the entire burden had fallen upon the very weakest—Aleksey. Countless times he saw the boy cry himself to sleep, calling for his mother. He had brought the boy into his care now, but what difference could he make?

Robert was glad to have adopted the boy from the orphanage, but he could not see a life of happiness for him. It was fortunate that Aleksey and Olivier seemed to have grown close so quickly, but without Olivier, Aleksey fell into terrible anxiety. There was no shortage of those who despised him—people who saw him as a concubine’s child trying to curry favor with the king’s proper heir. And when it wasn’t hate, it was those who got too close, thinking that Aleksey’s commoner upbringing and lack of experience would make him easy to control. Robert made sure that an imperial bodyguard was always at the boy’s side, but this wasn’t a particularly elegant solution.

The kingdom’s court, with its swirling vortex of differing motivations and opinions, was far too crushing a place for one who had grown up free, in a sound, healthy environment, only to lose their mother so young.

How can I call myself king? No matter how the people may praise me, I could not even protect my own son. I let the woman I love die.

He wondered what he should have done. Would it have been best for everyone if he had turned Jessica down that night? They both knew that the child was destined to become an illegitimate son of the royal family. But still Robert did not want to deny the existence of the child that was born of their time together.

He was selfish.

Robert stopped in place, and threw a fist at the wall. The rage in him had nowhere to go. He was disgusted by his own stupidity and cowardice. It was presumptuous of him to even speak the words “I love you.” To even attempt an apology.

“Jessica. Aleksey...”

At the edges of his gaze, the snow fell. It showed no signs of letting up.

Some years later...

The colors of the leaves had deepened to yellow-green, signaling the beginning of summer. Robert lifted himself up in bed and looked out at the beautiful contrast of refreshing blue skies over trees of green. He was still in his early forties, and yet according to the doctor, he had but a few months left to live.

The illness had slowly eaten away at his body. For the longest time he had not noticed, but over the last year it had made itself known, and quickly. He had moved his office next to his bedroom to ensure he could rest as necessary, but for the last six months he had been working more and more from bed, and for some weeks now he had been unable to even leave it.

Robert was not long for this world, and Olivier had already taken up his duties as king. Olivier was kind and gentle, and his youth had been spent hidden in the shadow of his two older brothers. At the time he had been appointed the king’s successor, Olivier had been ridiculed. They thought him unsuitable for the position. But none could say that now—Olivier was both kind and stern, and in him were the makings of a wise and intelligent king.

And then there was Aleksey.

“You’re leaving, then,” said Robert.

The two were alone. Aleksey—Robert’s second son—was determined, resolute.

“I am. I want to help Olivier, to support him...but right now I’ll only get in his way. I don’t want to cause him any further issues as the new king.”

Aleksey was throwing away his name, and his identity, and leaving the royal family.

The queen, too, did not have much longer. When the king had collapsed during work and it was known that he did not have much time left, the court nobles stood divided. But in truth, Robert had always known that such opposing feelings existed.

On the one hand were those vassals who pledged loyalty to the country and its king, and supported prince Olivier. Then there were those who supported the third prince, Aleksey—a group of new nobles and distinguished families who, for one reason or another, had fallen

out of the political spotlight. Their argument was that if the coming king was to be decided based upon order of birth, then the rightful heir was Aleksey.

It was a bold, presumptuous argument, but there were a surprising number of royals who stood behind it. Many were dissatisfied and disgruntled at the higher-ranking positions—of which there were few—being occupied by members of the same families, spanning two generations. The truth was simply that there was nobody else better suited to these roles, but nonetheless the dissatisfaction was real. Robert could sympathize with their sentiment.

However, though they put forth plausible rationales for their position, it was these nobles—those who supported Aleksey—who were most blinded by the potential power that lay within their grasp. Just how many of them were truly, honestly acting on behalf of the kingdom and its people? Their real plan was to take the defenseless prince and place him upon the throne as a puppet—something they could control from the shadows as they themselves occupied positions of true power.

Still, the heartfelt bond between Aleksey and Olivier, and how strong it was, had surprised even Robert himself. The ever-gentle and kind Aleksey had grown gaunt. He was constantly told lies about the brother he held so dear, and those who had once never even given him the time of day now doted on him constantly. He even found himself fending off young women scheming for the position of queen—women who were more than willing to weave lies to get there.

It became such that some of these families were expelled, but by that point the atmosphere in the castle was already slowly crumbling, and it would not be long before the politics of the kingdom were hurt by it all—or somebody died in the name of blood lineages.

If I wasn't here, none of this would have happened.

It was only natural that Aleksey would eventually come to have such a thought. It seemed that Olivier, too, who had been hurt terribly by the battle for the throne, felt there was no other way to save his brother than to release him from the kingdom and castle that were causing him such harm. It pained Olivier to think that it was because of his own inability that his brother had lost his freedom.

And it was also true to say that Robert had brought Aleksey into the family in part so he would provide support to Olivier, who at times seemed as though he might crumble under the responsibility of suddenly being named heir to the throne.

But when Robert heard their plea, and saw the haggard state into which Aleksey had fallen, his mind was made up. He would allow Aleksey to leave. He spoke with his close attendants and upon receiving their agreement, prepared a way for Aleksey to get away

safely. Word was also secretly sent to Bleyzac Fauchelle—who was already living among the common people and had known Aleksey for some time—that he might aid Aleksey in adjusting to his new life.

“I am sorry. All I ever did was bring you unhappiness.”

The words offered no salvation, but Robert felt compelled to speak them anyway. Not as a king, but as a father. Every burden he had caused had fallen upon this boy’s shoulders.

Aleksey’s eyes grew wide at the words. His hair and his face were nothing like Robert’s, but they shared dark magenta eyes. After some time, Aleksey spoke.

“To be honest, I can’t forgive you for leaving my mother on her own. As her son, and as a man, I just can’t. But at the same time, I am grateful to you—for giving me a life as my mother’s son, for giving me a brother, and for my education. And...”

Aleksey’s hair wavered, so much like Jessica’s. A hint of a smile could be seen in his eyes as he went on.

“Mother always said that though she couldn’t be with you, you were a wonderful, exceptional man. And for as long as I knew her, she never once lied to me. So I believe she spoke the truth. You were a horrible father, but I know that as a king you were exceptional. I read about it, all of it—the work that you and your father did and have done.”

“Alec, you...”

Robert knew what lay in Aleksey’s heart, and the words he wanted to say caught in his throat. He was a kind boy, and he had already forgiven his father. He could not speak the words, but he had forgiven Robert, even though he was a foolish, worthless man.

“Alec.”

“What is it?”

“Let me tell you the meaning of your name.”

“It has a meaning?”

Robert had been unable to do anything for his son. But at the very least, he could do this.

“Aleksey—it is an old word. It means ‘the protector.’”

“The protector...”

“I gave you that name, but it was your mother who chose your middle name.”

“She did?”

“Indeed. It is tradition in the royal family for the father to choose the first name, and the mother to choose the middle. Your middle name, Frenvary, is another old word, meaning ‘kind lands.’”

The protector. Kind lands.

“I could not protect either of you. And I do not wish for you to end up as I did. When you find that person to you—the one who is

more important than anything else—do your utmost to protect them.”

Aleksey Frenvary Storydia.

My beloved child. I wish for you strength, the confidence to stand tall, and to be as strong and as kind as the lands we are blessed with.

“I will,” said Aleksey. “I promise you that I will be the kind of man who will not tarnish the name I was given.”

With these words, Aleksey held out a fist. Robert was shocked, but understood enough to touch his own fist against his son’s. It was a sign between men—the pledging of an oath.

“I must go,” said Aleksey.

“Be well. And you need not come to...see me off. So long as you keep me in your thoughts, that alone will be enough.”

Aleksey’s breath caught in his throat for a moment. Then he nodded, looked upon his father with a strong gaze, then silently left.

This parting will be forever. My son leaves on a journey of his own. And I, too, will soon depart this world on my own journey.

Late that evening, Aleksey secretly left the castle. A few weeks later, on a beautiful morning in which a refreshing breeze blew, the king breathed his last.

The funeral for Robert Storydia was a grand and solemn affair arranged by his son, Prince Olivier Fersen Storydia. Among those who came to pay their respects, there was no sign of the missing third prince, Aleksey Frenvary Storydia.

However, on the morning of the funeral, a bouquet of flowers was delivered to the prince, with a note asking that they be placed at the king’s grave. It was a modest bouquet of the national flower—snow violets. Most assumed it was simply someone who wanted to pay respects to the deceased king.

Very, very few ever knew that the flowers were the favorite of a woman the king had once loved with the entirety of his heart.

Interlude 7: Flower Decorations

The heavy sound of a sword swinging through the air was followed by a spray of blood. The death cry of the crystal lizard was ear-piercing, and it echoed through the cave. The lizard's huge body crumpled in a heap, its blood running along the ground.

"If there's a crystal lizard here, it means we're getting close."

Alec flicked the blood from his prized sword and put it back in its scabbard. Then he knelt by the lizard's corpse and began to examine it. The fangs, claws, and scales were largely undamaged, which meant they could be used for various purposes.

The scales of the beast looked like thin crystal scrapings, but were surprisingly pliable. Each scale was about the size of a grown man's two hands, and could be made into knee or elbow protectors. They also had a beautifully subtle rainbow luster to them that made them good for decorating formal outfits.

The crystal lizard's claws and fangs also contained a large amount of magical essence, making them useful materials for magical recovery potions and other similar medicines. Those they collected today could be sold to Nils later.

"Is there a reason the lizards are staying so close?" asked Shiori, holding open a bag to help Alec with the gathering of the materials.

"There is. The crystal lizard is quite fond of snow star grass. It's carnivorous, yes, but it makes an exception for snow star grass. When its prey grows scarce in the winter, the grass is how the lizard survives."

Snow star grass. As the name implied, it was a flower shaped like a beautiful star. It only grew in the depths of caves and ruins. The hard crystalline flowers sparkled like falling frost, and when combined with a dark colored dress, the wearer looked not unlike they were wrapped in starry night skies. Such a dress made any girl the center of attention, and the envy of those around her.

On this particular occasion, the target of Alec and Shiori's request was that very grass. A young noble girl had intended to use them for her wedding dress, but because of some mistake or another, she'd ended up with the wrong flowers. She had quickly tried to order the snow star grass again, but it was a rare and special flower that wasn't handled by many merchants. With her wedding day drawing near, a request had been put in at the Guild.

A substitute of imitation flowers had been prepared, but for this once-in-a-lifetime occasion, the girl's groom-to-be desperately wished for his future wife's dress to be decorated with the real thing, if it was at all possible. He was the one who had submitted the request, stating that the snow star grass was special to them.

"It would be heartbreaking for them to have to resort to an imitation for such a special day," said Shiori.

"Indeed it would be," said Alec.

Alec and Shiori, who happened to be free at the time, picked up the request. It was a bit of a pain to get to the snowy mountain caves in which the flowers could be gathered, but a return trip could be made in four days—it was just a matter of how many flowers were needed. The requester had told them that even just two or three would be enough—if they couldn't source a good quantity for the dress, then he wanted at least enough to make earrings.

"All right—I think that's all we're going to get from the lizard," said Alec.

Once he'd finished removing all the materials from the lizard, the corpse that remained was left for the ready and waiting Rurii, who promptly absorbed it. The meat was far too tough for humans, but that didn't seem to matter one way or another to the slime, which melted the body into itself and trembled with satisfaction.

"Not a single part was wasted."

"You said it."

The slime hadn't left even a single bone behind, and flattened itself neatly along the ground. Shiori and Alec chuckled and walked deeper into the cave, and Rurii bounced along behind them. They walked by the light of a magic lantern when Shiori suddenly came to a stop.

"Hm... Huh?" she muttered.

"What's wrong?" asked Alec.

"I can feel a magical energy about twenty or thirty meters ahead. But it's different from a magical beast. It's like a whole group of small pulses of energy. It might be...light magic?"

It was her search magic that told her this. She tilted her head, confused by the unusual magical energy she felt. Alec had a feeling he knew what it was—if it wasn't a magical beast, and there were a lot of them gathered in the one place, then it had to be...

"It's probably the snow star grass," he said.

"Oh, really?"

"Snow star grass emits trace amounts of light magic. That's why it pulses with a dull light. Even one by itself is quite pretty, but a cluster of them is a breathtaking sight."

"Wow! Then I can't wait to see them!"

Alec smiled when he looked down to see Shiori breaking into an excited grin. She was smiling more often now. It wasn't that she didn't smile before, but there was always something fleeting, something fragile in it. Now, however, she smiled from the bottom of her heart.

I wonder if it's okay to believe that I'm the reason for that...

Alec hoped it was okay to take pride in the fact that, by being with the woman he loved, his warmth had helped to melt the ice around her closed heart. He wanted to dote on her, and hold her close, and make the heart she hid from the world his very own. He wanted it all for himself.

She looked up at him, and when she saw the passion in his eyes, her face flushed red and she looked down at her feet.

"You're so cute," Alec said.

"Wh-Where did that suddenly come from?"

"It's not sudden—I've always thought it."

"Oh... Er..."

Shiori grew even more red, smiling as Alec stroked her cheek, and Rurii, who had been walking on ahead, trembled with clear annoyance. "*What are you two doing in a place like this?!*" it seemed to say. "*Let's get moving!*"

As they walked on, they saw at the end of the path a soft, pure white emanating ahead.

"What is that? That light...is it...?"

"Looks to me like we've found a cluster of them," said Alec.

They picked up their pace and entered a wide, open area of the cave.

"Wow, it's amazing," uttered Shiori. "Like a starry sky."

Shiori let out a sigh of admiration at the sight, at a total loss for words. The darkness they'd had to navigate by magic lantern now glittered with countless lights like little diamonds. The grass rustled around them, and a feeling not unlike standing among an ocean of stars washed over them.

"This sure is something," said Alec. "It's the first time I've ever seen so many."

He took a cautious step into the plain of snow star grass, and a sound pinged in the air, like a purifying bell. It echoed lightly, then faded and vanished. They stood silent and in wonder until Rurii gave Alec a tap on the leg, bringing him to his senses.

"Well, let's get to gathering, then," he said.

"Yes, let's."

Shiori snapped back to reality just as Alec did, and she took out the preservation box they'd brought especially for the flowers. They carefully plucked the flowers, each one as small as a finger, and placed them gently in the cotton-lined box. In total, they needed

around fifty. They decided to gather sixty to be on the safe side.

"I'm so glad. Now the bride will have the dress she wants," said Shiori, as happy as if it were her own wedding. "But this grass feels like ice... It doesn't melt?"

"It melts, but not from heat. Over the course of about two weeks, it melts little by little and then simply vanishes. It's a strange thing—it doesn't leave a single trace."

Behind them, Rurii took a piece of snow star grass and absorbed it. It must have liked the taste, because it took more of it, then wobbled happily.

"Excellent—that's all of them," said Alec.

Shiori put the lid of the box carefully over the snow star grass, sealed it, and placed it in her knapsack. With that done, Shiori sat down and stared in wonder at the scenery around her, which sparkled like the night sky. She was so happy right where she was that she didn't even move.

As Alec watched her, surrounded by the snow star grass, he felt a playfulness bloom in his heart. He took a few of the flowers, lifted Shiori's hat from her head, and placed them in her hair.

"Hm? What are you doing?"

"Just sit still for a moment."

Alec kept her in place while he put the snow star grass in her hair.

"The masterpiece is complete," he said.

Shiori's hair was smooth and lustrous like the night sky, and now small stars glimmered in that darkness. It brought a light to her pale skin, and the snow star grass reflected in the black of her eyes like stardust.

She looks like the bride of the earth god, floating down from the skies... Like the goddess of the moon.

"Beautiful..." he said.

Shiori's cheeks, having just been blessed by the light of the stars, went red at his words.

"You, uh...you mean the flowers are beautiful...right?"

"Not nearly as beautiful as you, *min brud*," he said.

The last words of the sentence—*my bride*—were embarrassing for Alec, but he felt compelled to speak them, hiding them in the ancient Storydian language. As an Easterner, she wouldn't have caught them, but his feelings were made clear by the first part of his sentence, anyway. She was red all over as he brought her close to him.

My bride. Wrapped in your wedding dress, take the hand with which I reach to you.

He prayed that someday, that day would come, as he planted a passionate kiss on her lips.



Afterword

Hello, this is You Fuguruma. Thank you so much for spending some time with my book. I am indebted to your support—it is because of you readers that this story I wrote for fun got a physical edition, a second printing, and a sequel.

In this volume, our two scarred protagonists come together—both to heal and to aid one another in moving forward. This volume marks the two of them getting in touch with their pasts, and will also impact the people who play important roles in their lives. The web version of the story offers lots of looks into Shiori and Alec's life as adventurers after this volume, so feel free to drop by and check it out if you feel like it.

Finally, many thanks to Nama-sensei's wonderful illustrations, my editor for their guidance and advice (sorry for always going over the page limits...), and to the readers and my family for their support and cooperation. I'm also grateful to everyone who helped with the publishing of the book.

I hope to see you all again in the future.

Bonus Short Stories

The Diary of Rurii, the Slime

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Yesterday Alec stayed over. But he didn't seem to sleep so well. I think it was because he had to share the bed with Shiori. I guess there wasn't enough space for him. He was muttering things like, "Her bare neck..." and, "Her breasts are touching me..."

I wonder what it all meant. I've fallen asleep wrapped in the embrace of those bare breasts, and *I* never had any trouble sleeping.

■ ○ Month, □ Day

I got news from Pel today. They swallowed a black bug in front of Edvard, and he went pale and collapsed on the spot. Pel wanted to know why. I told them that lots of humans scream at the sight of those bugs, so it's best to eat them when they're not looking.

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Today was Shiori's portable-food-making day. I went out for a walk and bumped into Clemens. He was on his way to buy some liquor, so he took me with him. The shopkeeper offered him two bottles. One was called "All Alone" and the other was called "The Light of Tears." Clemens bought them both.

I have to wonder about the well-being of a shop that sells liquor with those kinds of names...

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Shiori slipped and almost fell while she was getting out of the bath. Alec leaped in, shouting, "Is everything okay?!" but he immediately went bright red and dove out of the room like lightning, shouting apologies. I gather that the problem was him seeing Shiori naked. Human nakedness is a sacred thing, it would seem. But then Alec also seems very jealous. Sometimes he tells me, "I can't believe you're right there with her in the bath, all the time."

I don't know why he doesn't just join us. Humans are such complicated creatures.

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Alec is coming to Shiori's place more and more often, but Shiori

doesn't go to Alec's place. I wonder why. Alec never asks her over.

"I want her to come over, but inviting a woman to a single man's apartment is...well, it's a clear invitation, no?" he said. "I want to treat her like the treasure she is, and if I let her into my room, I might do something I'll regret. But then again, if she doesn't mind, maybe that means it's no big deal?"

Ugh, this guy...

■ ○ Month, □ Day

Shiori fell asleep reading, and Alec stared at her with the kindest look on his face. He ran a hand through her hair, he stroked her cheek, he kissed her, and he held her in his arms as if he were handling a priceless treasure. Seeing them so happy together makes me really happy too. Shiori, Alec, and all the others... I hope they can live happily and do lots of fun things together, just like slimes.

Traumatizing Treats

"Shiori, there's a package for you."

Shiori was in the guild lounge finishing a report when Zack passed the parcel to her. It was a small box wrapped in tan-colored paper, her name written on it neatly in what appeared to be a woman's handwriting.

The sender was Anika from Brovito Village. Shiori had met her during the snow wolf incident. She remembered Anika had planned to set up a footbath to help attract travelers.

"It's from Anika... I wonder what it is?"

Inside the package were a few cans and a letter. The cans contained baked sweets. Puzzled, Shiori read the letter. It began with a heartfelt greeting, then some words on the current state of the village and about Anika herself. At the end of the letter was one last line, which seemed to be the key point of the letter. Shiori read it, then fell into thought. Then she read it over once again.

"Hm..."

"Something wrong?" asked Alec.

He'd been peeking over Shiori's shoulder, so she showed him the letter. As he read it, his eyes opened in surprise, then his face broke into a smile.

"Wow, so the sweets have your silhouette stamped on them? That's fun."

"Hm..." replied Shiori, seeming slightly troubled. "It's kind of embarrassing, though."

Anika had loved the idea of the footbath when Shiori had made one for the adventurers at their campsite. So, Anika had set one up at

the village to see if it would work, and visitors had liked it even more than she'd expected. Thus, the village had decided to put more effort into promoting the bath and was putting out a line of baked goods to help. Anika had sent Shiori some of their first attempts.

She'd written, *We wanted to give you the recognition you deserve for all your help.*

"And so they made sweets in your image. Fantastic. Lemme see," said Zack.

Shiori passed him one of the cans, and he removed the wax-paper wrapping and opened it. The round confections were about four centimeters wide with the profile of a woman wearing a wizard hat stamped on them.

"Whoa, impressive. I can tell it's you straight away," said Alec.

"They look fancy too. Not bad," added Zack.

The two men looked pleased to see Shiori rewarded for her efforts. Then Rurii decided to stop whatever it was doing between the gaps in the bookshelves and wandered over to look at the sweets. It trembled happily.

Shiori was the only one to lower her eyes, embarrassed. To her, all she'd done was share a little of her home culture. She'd never imagined this would be the result.

"I feel like it would have been a better idea to stamp these with snowtrees or the village's special beef mark..."

"Look at it this way," said Alec with a smile, placing his hand on her shoulder, "the villagers really wanted to show you their gratitude. And not just for the footbath either. You helped the injured, you freed the snow wolves, and you worked at the emergency campsite afterwards. You should see this as a token of their appreciation."

"You really think so?"

But she wasn't the only one who'd helped. There was Alec and the adventurers, plus the knights too. Everyone helped to support the village. Shiori really felt like the village shouldn't be singling her out. She told Alec as much, and he replied with a slightly troubled chuckle and ran a rugged hand through her hair.

"You might be right," he said, "but Anika herself is grateful for *your* help. It's just like I told you. I'm grateful for everything you've done for me too. It's okay to just accept it."

"Alec..."

The days of her being used as an outlet for the rage of others—and the days of her being unable to reach out for help—were over now. The days of working and working without that work ever being appreciated... She would not have to suffer that again. Shiori's tense shoulders relaxed at the thought, and she smiled.

"You're right. If I don't recognize my own efforts, then...it's a bit

like being rude to the people who do,” she said.

“There you go,” said Alec, his eyes like a gentle evening sky as he smiled.

He gave her a pat on the head then ran his fingers along her neck before taking his hand back.

“I’m still a bit embarrassed, but I think I’ll write Anika a reply.”

“Well, it is the birth of the Shiori snack, after all,” said Alec with a laugh.

Clemens walked up behind them.

“I see,” he said. “I suppose that means men who don’t even know her can have a taste of her.”

The words made every muscle in Alec’s body go tense. Zack, too, dropped all the letters he was trying to put in order.

“Strangers...unknown men...tasting...Shiori...” Alec uttered, staring at the sweets resting on the table. Sweets that had Shiori’s face stamped upon them. A silence fell over the room until Alec found his voice again.

“Only *I* can have her.”

He reached out for the baked sweets, but Zack slapped his hand away.

“What are you blabbering on about?!” he said.

“I am making clear my rights!” shouted Alec.

And so, as a perplexing but ultimately pointless argument broke out between lover and brother, Shiori gathered up the sweets—for she was not sure what else she could do with them—and handed them to Rurii. The slime quivered happily and swallowed them all up.

In the end, Brovito Village elected *not* to put Shiori’s image on their baked sweets and went instead with the symbol for the footbath itself.



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Adventures Feel Like Home! Volume 2
by You Fuguruma

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